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COUNTERSTORIES: EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE OF ADULT AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMEN ATTENDING AN URBAN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE  
UNIVERSITY

By  
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B.A., University of Louisville, 1995  
M.Ed., University of Louisville, 2002

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Education and Human Development of the University of Louisville  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership and Organizational Development

Department of Leadership, Foundations & Human Resource Education  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2015

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## DEDICATION

First of all, I dedicate this work to God, who, in his infinite wisdom, did not put on me more than I could bear. I must also dedicate this work to my husband William, who stood by me through all the obstacles hurdled in my way, shared my joy and pain, and fiercely fended off anyone or anything who tried to interfere with my goal. I am certain that our love is stronger than ever because of this experience. Thank you my love.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the six strong resilient women who volunteered to lend their voices for the sake of this research and for social justice. Thanks also go to Dr. Beth Bukoski for her one-on-one guidance and extreme patience through the entire process. When the odds were against me and I was getting tired, she would always encourage me to just “keep swimming.” Many thanks to my other committee members Drs. Gaëtane Jean-Marie, Ann Larson, Matt Bergman, and Terri Rowland for being sympathetic to my situation, recognizing the importance of this research, and for all their individual contributions that made completion possible.

## ABSTRACT

### COUNTERSTORIES: EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE OF ADULT AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ATTENDING AN URBAN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITY

Wanda A. Taylor

August 3, 2015

Although increasing numbers of adults are entering college, their attrition rates are higher than those of their traditional student counterparts (ACT, 2010; Bergman, 2012). Additionally African American women are entering college in larger numbers than their African American male counterparts, and more so than within other minorities or underrepresented students populations (Mangino, 2010; NCES, 2012; 2014; Ntiri, 2001; Rosales & Person, 2003). Turning away from the deficit notion of their intellectual and social abilities, this qualitative study utilized critical analysis (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano & Lynn, 2004) and participant reflection of first-hand experiences of resilient adult African American women university graduates of an urban predominantly White university (PWI).

Recruited through purposeful sampling from recent adult African American female graduates of the Bachelors of Science of Workforce Leadership program at the University of Louisville, their counternarratives were developed from a series of semi-structured interviews and existing documents. Critical race theory (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano & Lynn, 2004) and critical feminist theory (Wing, 2000) contributed the



theoretical framework for the analysis of the counternarratives. The most prevalent experienced adversities included perceived racism, family challenges and adult learner challenges. Coping strategies that impacted the educational resilience of adult African American women were found to be family support, spirituality and religious faith and inner strength. Implications to the persistence of adult African American women attending urban PWIs and practices and programming of adult student services in higher education are discussed.

*Keywords:* Adult African American women, educational resilience, critical race theory, critical race feminism, counternarratives

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## CHAPTER I

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Higher education is undergoing transitions that can no longer be underestimated. One of those is the increasingly diverse and growing adult student population. By 2015 adults will have surpassed in numbers the traditional college student (ACT, 2010; Bergman, 2012; NCES, 2014; 2012). This population has surpassed the development of American higher education's initiatives to address their needs (Closson, 2010; Kasworm, 2002; Noel-Levitz, 2012). For example, African American women are attending college in greater numbers than their male counterpart, more so than within other minorities or underrepresented populations (Mangino, 2010; NCES, 2011; Ntiri, 2001; Rosales & Person, 2003) but they are statistically lost among renewed efforts by colleges and universities to support African American higher educational initiatives (Rosales & Person, 2003). In other words, programs that center on African American youth, African American young men, women and some adult commuter students are now embraced by colleges and universities but few, if any, specifically address the needs of adult African American women ages 25 and older.

Recent studies have begun to challenge or counter societal assumptions of adult African American women's intellectual inferiority with an anti-deficit perspective and approach (Harper, 2012; 2009) and alternately exploring how their resilience contributes to their persistence (Brown, 2008; O'Connor, 2002; Payne, 2011). For adult African

American women who have made the decision to attend college, all the afore-mentioned issues are fragments that make up their experience as undergraduate students attending urban predominantly White institutions. To contribute to the small body of knowledge of their experiences and how develop resilience, counternarratives within a critical framework (cite source) will help fill that gap. The complexity of the adult African American women's university experience bears mention of her identity as an adult student, as an African American female student, and what is currently known about educational resilience.

### THE PLIGHT OF THE ADULT LEARNER

Adult students are an important force in the American economy because they make up a significant percentage of the workforce and of consumers (Jones, Mortimer, & Sathre, 2007). In 2011, students ages 25-34 and 35 and older accounted for half of the part-time enrollment at public 4-year institutions (29% and 21% respectively) (NCES, 2012). The problem is college completion rates among adult students remain poor (Bergman, 2012) due to older students' perceived fading academic skills (Samuels, Beach, & Bierlein, 2011), limited scheduling flexibility, and lack of access to useful information about the benefits of a college degree (Noel-Levitz, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2003). Another reason for low retention rates for adult students is limited opportunities such as having a break in their undergraduate education, having to be part-time students with full-time jobs and families, and limited involvement in the collegiate environment.

Adult students are part of the nontraditional student population. The nontraditional student is actually becoming the new traditional student or "post traditional student" due to its growing population (Soares, 2013). Nontraditional students do not

only consist of adults over age 25, but of young people who share similar criteria such as full-time employment, dependents to care for, and part-time college enrollment. With that in mind, this study applies to adult students age 25 and older who work full time and are part-time students. They may or may not have spouses and other dependents. Student retention of adults has been a priority for many colleges and universities. Therefore more institutions have planned and formulated strategic initiatives for the purpose of supporting the degree attainment of adult students (Sawyer, et al., 2009; University of Louisville 20/20 Plan, 2008). One of those challenges for college and university administrators at urban predominantly White institutions is to include the needs of adult African American women as part of their mission to contribute to the intellectual, cultural, and economic development of their diverse surrounding communities and its citizens.

For many adult students, enrolling or returning to college is a major decision that needs to fit within their complex lives and the various roles they juggle with on a daily basis as a parent, employee, and citizen. Adult students need a strong emotional, familial support system, and economic support, in addition to academic resources to enable their persistence, from registration to graduation. For adult Black women<sup>1</sup> undergraduates, this also includes the importance of maintaining her cultural and racial identity, and constantly proving her intellectual worth, in the wake of racial, gender, and economic oppression (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Zamani, 2004). Her marginalization is a “double jeopardy” experience of being both Black and female (Alexander-Floyd & Simien, 2006).

Adult African American women, as other adults, also come with expectations of what

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term African American and Black are used interchangeably. Post-traditional and non-traditional student are used interchangeably with adult students.



they think colleges should provide and what their experiences actually turn out to be. If expectations and reality do not match up, they're more likely to drop out (Kasworm, 2002; Noel-Levitz, 2002).

Although efforts to address adult student issues have begun, many universities still primarily base their student retention practices on traditional student integration theories. Such theories insist on student assimilation into the university environment and traditional student culture, instead of the university evolving to accommodate its increasingly diverse and growing adult population from their standpoint, both culturally and socioeconomically (Kasworm, 2002). As African American women, issues of both racism and gender oppression make up part of their historical background in higher education since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A discussion of their education resilience follows, as well as a detailed explanation of what it means to be educationally resilient.

#### AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Where memories of resistance to the civil rights movement and once accepted forms of segregation and marginalization remain strong, adult African American women value the privilege to walk upon a racially and ethnically diverse campus with the opportunity for higher education and a hope for a better quality of life. Just as her male counterpart, the African American woman's pursuit of higher education has always posed a tremendous challenge. Mary Jane Patterson became the first Black woman in the United States to earn the AB degree from Oberlin College in 1862 (Alic, 2009). Segregated education was the norm through much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the U. S. Although ever present, there is little mention of Black women in the early days of Black education. As Gasman (2007) points out, early histories of African American higher

education were male-oriented, with little or no mention of Black women's personal experiences. Their lives were shaped by policies designed to control their behavior (Gasman, 2007). Rigorous religious customs were in place that maintained control in terms of race and gender. A commonly used religious doctrine of St. Paul was used to maintain women as second-class status. Black women were told that, according to the Bible, "patient waiting was beheld above the development of one's talents" (Slowe, 1933; Bell-Scott, 1980).

The earliest small mention of Black women undergraduates focused on the founding Black colleges through the works of Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. DuBois, Horace Mann Bonds, Henry Bullock, and James D. Anderson. Woodson (1919) included one chapter on higher education, but the focus was not on Black women and their specific role. As with most of the historical literature of African American education, examples in Woodson's publication pertained to either White women and Black men and the efforts of White male industrial philanthropists, abolitionists, and churches to establish Black educational institutions. Woodson (1933) criticized Black education due to White philanthropists' control of Black institutions and non-recognition of Black leadership. He left out mention of Black female presidents and principals such as Mary McLeod Bethune, who founded a training school for girls in 1902, at what is now known as Bethune-Cookman College; but he does note the degrading treatment of Black women by the White administration, refusing to address them as ladies. This title was only afforded to White women, who were placed on a pedestal in the minds of southern White men.

Later historical writings discuss early social experiments promoted by White industrialists to train Black women in the industrial arts, with an emphasis on teacher

training and nursing (Bullock, 1967). Still, no insight was given to the experiences of Black women on campus. Anderson (1988) echoed the racist treatment of Black females where he mentions how rebel slave Elizabeth Sparks participated in secret meetings in the slave quarters where free Blacks taught slaves to read. Anderson examined the Hampton model, where the women received less training than their male counterparts and were pushed toward learning only domestic skills, such as sewing, ironing, scrubbing, washing, and mending (1988). Johnetta Cross Brazzell's (1992) case study on the women of Spelman College highlighted the role of early White female presidents. As with early historically White institutions, strict Victorian codes of behavior was the norm socially, in dress, language and manners. Anything less was unacceptable and grounds for dismissal.

By the 1940s, the few Black women who made it to college usually attended as a result of their family tradition, or social standing (Etter-Lewis, 1993; Nobel, 1988) and strong paternal influence. From generation to generation, numerous Black women dealt with constraints directly linked to their positioning as Blacks and as women (O'Connor, 2002). On predominantly White campuses, Blacks' access was threatened by racists and sexist presumptions by Whites, resulting in racial isolation, marginalization and hostility. Legislation such as Affirmative Action and Title IX (Public Law 92-318) continues to affect their admission to college considering race and their participation in sports in respect to gender. For Affirmative Action, a debate exists where the success of minorities and women are perceived as unearned (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Schuetz v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*, No.12-682, 2012). But at the same time, when race can no longer be a factor in admission selections, the result can be denial of access to higher

education opportunities for minorities. For African American women, Title IX does not specifically have to apply because it was designed to target discrimination and promote equality along the single-axis of gender. This was based on the assumption that equal access remedies were distributed between genders also within racial groups. Mathewson (2012) argues “that Title IX, in remediating gender discrimination, does not mitigate the effect of racial discrimination against African American females, creating an imbalance in gains between African American and white female athletes.” The complexity of intersectionality of race, gender and class continues to present itself for African American women.

Today many Black women undergraduates claim to continue to feel the stress brought about by their higher education experience. Rosales and Person (2003) point out that “the myth that Black women have achieved high levels of educational and career attainment over the past twenty years may contribute to the lack of attention by some colleges and universities” (p. 53). Some African American women withdraw from their courses. Others develop depression and cardiovascular diseases. As a result, the psychological, physical health and well-being of adult African American women are at stake (Clark, 2006; Henry, Butler, & West, 2011). Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) point out that internalized feelings of rejection may surface in the form of an intimidating persona, in order to mask the pain and to distance themselves from their oppressors. Unfortunately, this response is viewed stereotypically as that of the “angry Black woman” (Walley-Jean, 2009). Looking at the resilience of African American women may help deactivate, somewhat, this stereotypical view so often taken as the norm.

## EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Educational resilience is where individuals experience success in college despite risk (Masten, 2001). How the individual reacts or negotiates the constraints experienced is the central focus of this study. The research mentions several means of expression and sharing of personal experiences used by Black women. Examples include the use of safe havens of confidentiality such as counterspaces (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Counterspaces are areas of social support where students can better cope with stress related to lack of acceptance or fitting in, cultural conflict, mistrust of the institution, racism, and stigma (Nuñez, 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007). Examples of counterspaces include hush harbors (Kynard, 2010; Nunley, 2004, 2006), and sister circles (Neal-Barnett, et al., 2011). Counterstories are also used as verbal and written means of expression that oppose the societally-accepted assumptions of the behaviors and abilities of racial and ethnic minorities (Linderman-Nelson, 2001; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). Other ways African American women make sense of their experience are use of one's spirituality (Bryant-Davis, 2005; El-Khoury et al., 2004; Lewis, 2006; Wood & Hilton, 2012; Patton & McClure, 2009), past parental teachings and experience, family (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2009; Herndon & Hirt, 2004), development of a "toughness" (a defensive shield against recognized discrimination), a wisdom to choose one's battles wisely, music as stress releaser, as well as other self-regulatory skills.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

There are three main purposes of this study. The first purpose is to add to the limited body of knowledge on resilient adult African American women graduates who

attended urban predominantly White institutions (PWIs). This is accomplished by obtaining more detailed insight into their personal experiences as college students.

The second purpose is the use of a critical perspective to fill the gap lacking in the current literature, which involves critical race theory and critical race feminist theory to best address the college experiences of adult African American women. Few higher education studies in PWIs have applied a more anti-deficit approach to their academic and social issues as an alternative to emphasis on their failure (Kynard, 2010; Williams & Nichols, 2012). Critical race theory acknowledges the experiential knowledge of people of color as legitimate, appropriate, and essential to the understanding of racial subordination (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). A critical race feminist framework addresses both the racial, gender and class status elements that intersect within adult African American women's experiences (Wing, 2000). Use of the women's counternarratives to "counter" what has been accepted as truth by U. S. society's majority in power will offer a unique and more accurate perspective of how they maintained their resilience.

The third purpose to this study is to address strategies associated with resiliency as major contributors that lead to persistent behavior. An outcome of this purpose is identifying sources of resilience applicable to the resilience of other marginalized groups and other adult African American women attending other types of colleges and universities.

### Research Method and Design

Giving voice to the adult African American female undergraduate's experience, as only she can tell it, is critical to penetrating the "race, gender, and class hierarchies of [higher] educational institutions" (Kynard, 2010) through which she must navigate. The

source of her educational resilience, while attending an urban predominantly White institution, is appropriately examined through a critical lens which utilizes rich descriptions and narratives that counter the master narrative. In other words, a critical approach consisting of a critical race and critical race feminist theoretical framework addresses and opposes the American university's deficit notion and historically White superior institutional standard towards students of color, and, more specifically, African American women.

To that effect, this qualitative study used a critical approach using the framework of critical race theory and critical race feminism for the following reasons. Critical race theory was selected because it greatly reduces the potential for marginalization of adult African American women while centering on their experiences (Few, 2007). Critical race feminism was selected because it added a secondary layer of a social justice agenda by focusing on how institutions reinforce social inequalities where Black women must interact daily. Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions with adult African American women graduates and seniors were used to probe unanticipated responses.

### Research Questions

The research questions to be addressed in this study are listed below.

1. How do adult African American women describe their experiences at an urban PWI?
2. What adversities do adult African American women confront at an Urban PWI?
3. How do adult African American women respond to adversities throughout their undergraduate experience?

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to the limited research on the educational resilience of adult African American women who attended urban PWIs. Use of a critical framework offers a voice to first-hand personal experiences of the women whose voices would likely otherwise go unheard – lost among the general college initiatives to retain students. It also acknowledges their experiential knowledge as legitimate and valid. Findings from this study may help other marginalized and underrepresented students learn strategies to become more resilient. Additionally, PWIs may recognize more effective means of being more culturally sensitive when considering policies and programming that contributes to the creation of an environment more conducive to the educational resilience of adult African American women. Finally, this study may help student affairs and student services initiatives as they commit to improving inclusiveness, equity, and access for students of color; in this case, adult African American females.

## LIMITATIONS

Some limitations to this study could not be ignored. First of all, qualitative study does not lend itself to the generalization of experiences of all adult African American women undergraduates attending urban PWIs, nor adult African American women attending other types of higher educational institutions. Additionally, this study does not necessarily intend to imply applicability or generalizable to other college and university student populations. The sample size of women is relatively small (six) in order to apply extensive analysis of obtained data. To deter researcher bias as much as possible, open-ended research questions supplement semi-structured interview questions to avoid



potentially influencing the participants' answers. Additionally, a reflective journal made aware of inaccurate assumptions to avoid and maintain adherence to the data.

## DEFINITIONS

To better understand this study, the following definitions are provided. These operational definitions are given in the context of higher education:

1. Academic persistence – the ability to complete academic pursuits toward degree attainment (Ross et. al, 2012).
2. Academic resilience – (in the context of this study) traditionally valued high achievement in spite of negative intellectual and societal based stereotypes and other forms of racial bias among Black students (McGee & Martin 2011).
3. Adult learners - Higher education institutions define adults by using chronological age, typically 25 years or older. Additional factors may, but not necessarily, be one or more of the following: delayed post-secondary enrollment, part-time attendance, full-time work while enrolled, financial independence, single parenthood, military service, and lack of a standard high school diploma (Johnson-Bailey, 2006; Kasworm, 2002).
4. African American students – American students thought or known to be of Black African descent (Merriam-webster.com: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/african%20american>).
5. Assimilation – The process of absorbing a minority group into the main cultural body. By wholly absorbing the main cultural group's behaviors, characteristics, and values, the minority group, along with their own cultural group's behaviors, characteristics, and values, are not valued or acknowledged

by the main cultural body. Freeman and Freeman (2001) consented by stating, “Assimilation involves losing one’s primary culture and becoming similar to those of the target culture” (p. 43).

6. Counternarratives- (sometimes called counterstories) a narrative of life experiences; storytelling that expresses non-mainstream experiences (Yosso, 2006); a methodology in which value is given to the subjectivity of the Black female experience. The hope is, that by revealing these private conversations, the Black female can move beyond experienced isolation and victimization, and that ethnic cleansing and hypocrisy can be recognized where it exists. Its aim is to expose, analyze and challenge the stories of those in power or the majoritarian stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).
7. Counterspaces- places or spaces where marginalized groups can meet to share, discuss, and/or remove themselves from their experiences of racism and discrimination. Such spaces can serve as a means of academic or social support (Grier-Reed, 2001; Jones-Malone, 2011).
8. Critical race feminism – a critical approach which contributes sociological and historical lenses to the experiences of Black women. It examines the intersection of race, class and gender in their experiences but does not limit itself to any one racial and/or ethnic group (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).
9. Critical race theory (CRT) - developed from legal theory, it recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of the American society. Based upon the framework that institutional racism is pervasive in the dominant culture, critical race theory is used in examining existing power structures

which are based on White privilege and White supremacy. Such power structures perpetuate the marginalization of people of color. As a movement, critical race theory can be seen as a group of interdisciplinary scholars and activists interested in studying and changing the relationship between race, racism and power. CRT in education analyzes the challenges and effects of race and racism on educational structures, practices, and discourses (Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002).

10. Educational resilience – is academic success in spite of risk. (Masten, 2001)
11. Hush harbors – a site where Black women build virtual spaces for sharing counterstories that oppose institutional racism; a means of finding voice within a hostile environment, communicating in the “language of its people or culture” (Raboteau, 2004).
12. Intersectionality – intersecting patterns of racial, gender, and class discrimination (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; University of California Center for New Racial Studies, 2011).
13. Microaggression- conscious, unconscious, verbal, nonverbal, and visual forms of insults that are directed toward people of color (Sue, 2010).
14. Nontraditional students – students that have delayed enrollment in college or stopped out temporarily. They may have family responsibilities, such as having dependents, and financial constraints, work full-time but attend college part-time, may or may not have earned a traditional high school diploma; another name for adult learners (NCES, 2010).

15. Narratives – narratives are stories told by the person who had the experience (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
16. Racial stratification – an unequal distribution of rights and privileges among members of a society, with a dominant group maintains an interest in keeping the racial order in place (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Zuberi & Bonilla-Siva, 2008).
17. Racism - beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of observable characteristics or ethnic group affiliation (Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006).
18. Resilience – overcoming adversity from risky situations or experiences (Masten, 2001).
19. Sister Circles – groups of African American women (a counterspace) where thoughts and feelings are shared and heard. The function can be one of support or serve as a sound board or psychological stress releaser (Neal-Barnett, et al., 2010).
20. Standpoint- beyond the telling of individual women’s narratives; a means of the self-assertion of one’s own identity, challenging those identities imposed by conventional stereotypes that form part of hegemonic ways of thinking from the point of view of the socially and politically dominant. This assertion of identity adds to a body of knowledge one’s life and how one experiences the world. Those truths debunk myths about people, their relationship with the world, and about relationships with others in that world that have heretofore been taken to be true (Collins, 2000).

21. Stereotype threat - a socially premised psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies (Steele, 1997; Steele and Aronson, 1995).

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTER I

The reality of many adult African American women encompasses experiences that address her race, her gender and social class. To counter the negative, deficit analysis prominently researched in the literature of her academic experience, a critical approach acknowledges her experiential knowledge as valid and legitimate (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Specifically, critical race feminism serves as a useful framework for speaking to the experiences of adult African American women's intersectionality in higher education (Wing, 2000). The next chapter addresses what is currently known about African American women as adults, their racial experience in higher education, and the theoretical framework that best describes their experiences while attending an urban predominantly White university.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Overview

Much of the early resilience literature about minorities in higher education focused on why they failed (O’Leary, 1998; O’Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1998) instead of addressing why some succeeded. Examples of master narratives in educational research, connoting a deficit model, use terms like “at risk” to label and predict economically disadvantaged students’ success in school. Such master narratives imply that these “at risk” students, who are often students of color, do not have the skills to succeed (Stanley, 2007; Valenzuela, 2004). With this study, such deficit framing is replaced with anti-deficit inquiry, which focuses on understanding how achievers from disadvantaged backgrounds manage academic success (Harper, 2010). The intersectionality of race, gender and class for adult African American women calls for a review of what the research has covered about their experience as adults, as African American women in American society, and as resilient students.

#### ADULT STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Adult students make up a growing, diverse population in higher education (Kasworm, 2010; NCES, 2012). It was predicted that by 2015 adults would eventually surpass in numbers the traditional college student (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). In 2002, Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback speculated that the higher

percentages of enrollment may be where more programs, services, and policies are oriented to adult students and support learning as situated within their complex lives. This recognition is significant for implications to four-year research-intensive universities because three quarters of adult students attending two-year institutions transferred to four-year institutions to earn baccalaureate degrees (Cuseo & Farnum, 2011; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994), many of these are predominantly White institutions. Also noteworthy is that adult learners have experienced more limited opportunities to access research universities (Kasworm, 2010).

### Defining Adult College Students

Traditional students are defined as students who enroll in college the following fall semester after their high school graduation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). They may reside or commute to campus, attend full-time, and earn a bachelor's degree within four years of enrollment. However, adult college students are defined in several different ways: categorically by age or stage in life, economic independence, and adult roles (Johnson-Bailey, 2006; Kasworm, 2002).

### Who They Are

The following criteria will be used for this study but it is important to note that adult students are nontraditional but not all nontraditional students are necessarily adults. A young person under age 25 could meet one or more of the following characteristics mentioned as follows, making that person also a nontraditional student. The National Center for Education Statistics (2013) identified seven characteristics of a nontraditional student: delayed enrollment (or older than typical age), part-time enrollment, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, have dependents, is a single parent,

or did not receive a standard high school diploma. According to the NCES (2013), the number of applicable characteristics one possesses determines whether the adult student is minimally nontraditional, moderately nontraditional, or highly nontraditional (U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012; National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 1986-87 [NPSAS: 87], 1989-90 [NPSAS: 90], 1992-93 [NPSAS: 93], Data Analysis Systems). One nontraditional characteristic means the student is minimally nontraditional. Two or three nontraditional characteristics means the student is moderately nontraditional. Four or more nontraditional characteristics means the student is highly nontraditional.

Another general description attributed to adult students defines them as having one or more of the following characteristics: age 25 years or older; a commuter; status of maturity and developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence; and the status of responsible and often-competing sets of adult roles reflecting work, family, community, and college student commitments (Kasworm, 2003). Adult students are typically employed full-time with the role of spouse and/or parent (Villella and Hu, 1991).

### Why They Attend College

Many adults enter or re-enter college as a result of a significant life event, such as divorce, forced or voluntary change in career path to compete in the job market, or a hope towards an improved quality of life for themselves and their families (Kasworm, 2010, 2010a; Kasworm, 2005; Kazis, et al., 2007; McKinnon-Slaney, 1994; Rice, 2003; Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Stoel, 1980). Other reasons adults attend college may be very personal and internal (Kasworm, 2002), such as being a role model for their



children or following through on a set goal instilled in them by family influence or motivation. They weigh the pros and cons of why and when to enroll or return to college, and the potential sacrifice and rewards from the outcomes (Kasworm, 2010). With full-time jobs and family responsibilities, adult students have limited involvement in the collegiate environment (Kasworm, 2010). As a result, their perceptions of higher education change as they build their careers, take on positions in their communities, and their family grows.

### Adult Student Services

From admissions to orientation to academic and career counseling, an increasing number of colleges and universities offer unique resources and referrals for adult students (Rice, 2003; Rosales & Person, 2003). Areas of concern include financial planning and budgeting, childcare and elder-care services, counseling services, studying skills development, time management and stress management, to name a few. Many adult student services offices offer alternative hours to accommodate the limited time they can be on campus and at a location they would typically venture while on campus. In addition, workshops are typically offered throughout the academic year to give adults an opportunity to share experiences, provide resources information, to vent, mentor and support one another. Some universities offer groups specifically for women to address their special needs. (Kasworm, 2002, 2003; Rice, 2003;). To better understand the standpoint of what it means to be an adult Black female college student, it helps to discuss what theoretical perspective best delves into her reality and experience.

## EVIDENCE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

In order to understand the educational resilience of adult African American women undergraduates at an urban PWI, it is also important to discuss the experiences of African American women in this context. This section of the chapter will discuss African American women undergraduates, perceived racial bias within the PWI environment, and stereotypes of college African American women.

### Adult African American Women Undergraduates

As a historically oppressed, marginalized people, adult African American women know all too well about adversity. They continue to suffer the effects of racial and gender bias both on and off campus (Bowman, 1995; Hayes, 2000a, 2000b) and deal with the negative consequences of their community environments, limited financial resources, and greater mortality rates from disease (DHHS, 1999). Adult African American women carry to college their behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions evolved over time to deal with tasks or situations imposed upon them by societal social structures (Savickas, 2005, 2011; Stolz, et al., 2013). As a result, their college success is almost predetermined by the availability or lack of availability of academic resources prior to college and access to institutional support (O'Connor, 2002). In addition, the need for further examination of the resilience of racial minorities is acknowledged by researchers (Barbaran, 1993; Miller, 1999; Miller & MacIntosh, 1999; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007). Therefore, for those adult African American women who academically succeed in the face of such adversity, their resilience, as opposed to their persistence, is most suitable to describe their experiences.

Literature on adult African American women as undergraduates is very limited and few specifically address their experience at PWIs. Of those articles, three relatively recent studies were clearly age-specific (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; O'Connor, 2002; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Utilizing either a Black feminist (BFT) or critical race theoretical framework (CRT), each study used a qualitative research methodology to obtain a deeper understanding of various factors of the adult Black female college experience.

### *Black Feminist Perspective*

With the first study, Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) used a Black feminist framework to examine how societal conditions affect the educational experiences of adult African American women as communicated through the use of personal narratives. First, the study acknowledged that academia does not exist in a vacuum but is an extension of society's power structure over race, gender, class, and color. Another key theoretical point raised in this study is that previous research on adult women tends to generalize to the point where issues experienced by adult White women are similar to those of adult Black women, when in fact the adult Black female's experience is infused with the awareness of the societal and institutional forces that shaped and formed her existence. She does not necessarily separate her identity of being both Black and female.

For this study Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) recruited eight women, who were reentry students between the ages of 34 and 54 years old, both undergraduate and graduate students. They were purposefully selected from a variety of universities and colleges: a predominantly Black women's college, a predominantly White women's college, a two-year community college, a large southern state university main campus,

and a four-year religious affiliated university. A Black feminist theoretical framework was considered best suited for the study. An analysis of the narratives, derived from unstructured interviews, determined that, among the many deterrents the women experienced, the most important deterrent was the experience of racial and gender subordination in the classroom and the collegiate social environment.

The results mirrored what the Black women already experienced in society at large and they responded accordingly, regardless of their different backgrounds. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) argued that this research contributed greater understanding of the adult Black women's collegiate experience as a whole, while at the same time, the women's awareness, fears and self-concepts revealed in the findings, supported the claim that the power structure based upon race, gender, class, and color is very much a part of higher education.

#### *Critical Race Theory of Resiliency Perspective*

Previously mentioned as a key study of educational resilience of adult African American women, this second study on adult Black college women took a more exploratory approach in a specific context of a large mid-Western university, where most of the women attended the flagship campus. O'Connor (2002) used a qualitative, exploratory method to use life stories that speak to the educational resiliency of nineteen adult African American women. The focus here was to look beyond personal characteristics of resilience and instead examine resilience as a response to interactions between the person, social context, and opportunities (Rigsby, 1994). O'Connor (2002) spoke of educational resilience as opposed to the majoritarian assumption of cultural deficit. The researcher tied in the critical race tenet of challenging traditional historical

perspectives of race and racism with concern to the historical development of perceptions of constraints and opportunities affect adult African American women's educational resilience over several generations.

Using within-case and cross-case analyses of interview data, the researcher explored how constraints and opportunities for 19 women shifted and varied from one generation to another. Findings of this study revealed that a combination of risk, constraint, and opportunity intersect in the real world and the perceptions of these three areas vary across generations, (especially in terms of risk,) possibly shedding more insight to how the students process resiliency. O'Connor (2002) suggested future research should be directed toward developing the precision with which we make sense of the resilience of other marginalized college students, within and across racial and ethnic groups and gender.

#### *Culturally Based Curriculum Perspective*

The third study combined CRT, BFT, and an adult learning theoretical framework to explore areas of the adult Black women undergraduate's experience. Sealey-Ruiz's (2007) qualitative research on the college curriculum relevancy of 15 adult African American women attending a liberal arts college introduces critical race curriculum or CRC. CRC is a combination of Black feminist theory, critical race theory, and a curriculum specifically addressing the culture of the adult African American learner. It is embedded with an "Africentric" philosophy that validates and values the experiences of African Americans and emphasizes race as a guiding principle in understanding their status in the United States (Sealey-Ruiz, 2009, p. 46). Through constant comparison analysis of written assignments, journal entries, notes capturing classroom discussions,

and analytic log entries, findings revealed that the use of CRC allowed the women the “opportunity to deconstruct negative stereotypes about themselves and uncover praiseworthy aspects of their history and culture” (p. 58). The adult Black women’s experiences were used as a basis for their assignments and therefore created a relevant curriculum where they felt valued and enabled to claim ownership of their learning.

Sealey-Ruiz’s (2007) findings confirmed what many African American students are keenly aware of – the significance of positive self-identity and culture is intrinsically a part of who they are. Black women, in particular, infuse being Black and female together. There is no separation of the two. They value the ability to connect to their own people. Also confirmed was that, as all adults do, African American women reflect on their own rich personal experiences and draw on this knowledge to make meaning (Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm & Dirkx, 1999; Kasworm, 1997). Therefore, being an adult is also a component of their identity and bears discussion.

#### Racial Bias within the PWI Environment

Although PWIs have improved their recruiting goals to increase the number of African American students and adult students in recent years (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010), their attrition numbers have not improved (Robertons, Mitra, & Van Delinder, 2005). The overall climate at PWIs has not developed to the point where it meets the needs of its ever-growing diverse student population (Adams, 2005; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008); Von Robertson, Mitra, & Delinder, 2005). Race-related stressors have a huge bearing on adult African American womens’ academic success (Asburn-Nardo & Smith, 2008; Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003) and serves as a constant

reminder of her “Blackness” (Guiffrida, 2006; Parker & Flowers, 2003). “Blackness” refers to her physical appearance, manner of speech, and other perceived cultural differences by White society. Masked behind what appears to be civility, inferential racism and sexism prevail in the college classroom and are reflected in some college policies and curriculum. Sources of race-related stressors include stereotype threat that challenges her intellectual worth as a woman and as an African American (Patton, 2004).

At PWIs it is commonplace for African Americans to experience isolation in the classroom, feel devalued and face insensitivity to cultural differences by White faculty and students (Chaisson, 2004; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010;). For example, at PWIs Black students are often put in the position of representing their race to the predominant White system (Turner, 2001). Many feel pressured to speak and act a certain way in order to fit in within the dominant environment (Simmons, 2013). In addition, the college curricula of many PWIs remain culturally insensitive or void of the Black experience, and in some cases, downright hostile in response to any challenge suggesting curriculum reform (Adams, 2005; Lamos, 20127). Therefore, dealing with race-related stressors and the challenge to maintain their cultural identity is engrained within the daily personal experiences of African American women at PWIs. Utsey (1999) identifies three forms of racism that produce race-related stress. Individual racism implies a person is less important or less intelligent than non-Blacks. Institutional racism is systematic denial of access to resources or opportunities. Cultural racism involves treatment belittling or denigrating one’s culture. Many adult Black women have personally experienced or are familiar with all three forms as PWI students.

Underrepresentation may also attribute to Black students at PWIs being challenged with maintaining their cultural identity. Flowers (2003) argues that this does not necessarily mean the challenge to maintain cultural identity is enough in itself to hinder academic success. Some African American students manage to complete their academic programs in spite of having few Black faculty and administrators on campus or an ethnically-sensitive curriculum in the classroom.

### Stereotypes of College African American Women

Adult African American women experience college differently than most traditional students (Robertson, Mitra, & Delinder, 2005; Johnson, 2001) and even differently than Black male undergraduates. They bring to the classroom their roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and workers in a society segmented by race, class, and gender (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). As a result, many adult African American women are cautious and guarded with their emotions and their dignity as they navigate through the college environment. Societal perceptions of identity are a major concern for African American women. Black women undergraduates often have been portrayed by both Black and White researchers as single mothers, financially and socially underprivileged, academically unprepared, and likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, in comparison to their White counterparts (Henry, Butler, & West, 2011; Henry, West & Jackson, 2010; Sanchez, 1997). The racial and gendered marginalization of adult African American women was often addressed by higher education research in an irrelevant manner (Lerner, 1992; Moses, 1989); but now openly acknowledged by recent research (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Zamani 2002).



As a result, many Black women have felt a pressure to either assimilate in terms of their appearance, of how they communicate intellectually and socially, or whether to combat the stereotypical expectations of their intellectual, professional, and social abilities perceived by college faculty, administrators, and even by some of their own peers (Donovan, 2011; Johnson-Bailey, 1994, 1998, 2001; Lipsitz, 1998). Women of color have had, and continue to, cope with multiple identities and consciousness, adapt in order to survive in a racist society while, at the same time, hold on to beliefs and values and remain aware of the values of their oppressor.

Furthermore, Black female students must attempt to combat the stereotypical propaganda that flows through radio, TV and film media (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Unfortunately, this propaganda is fueled not only by Whites but also by Blacks. Some Blacks have grown so weary of battling the stereotypes or strongly feel the pressure to assimilate to the dominant society to the point where they've reconciled to accept these falsehoods as fact (Shapiro & Neuberg, 2007). In other words, expecting no more of themselves academically as students reinforces what was previously mentioned regarding deficit framing (Harper, 2010).

As an example of how Black women cope with racism, West, Donovan and Roemer (2010) quantitatively measured how 113 Black women attending an urban public university perceived racial discrimination. Results from the multiple regressions determined that the women tended to use avoidant coping in response to perceived racial discrimination and displayed depressive symptoms. Most of the women experienced subtle racial discrimination, such as being treated unfairly by strangers – many of whom were service workers. The authors suggested further study should focus on longitudinal

research and the intersection of gender, race, and class oppression among other women of color.

## EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE AND ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE

Although they seem similar, there are some distinct differences demonstrating why examining educational resilience instead of academic persistence is more suitable for understanding the experiences of adult African American women undergraduates. Adult student persistence has been traditionally linked to college student attrition (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon, 2004). Academic persistence involves what Arnold (1999) calls a “continuation behavior” towards graduation. This continuation behavior is dependent upon factors such as the student’s institutional commitment (Townsend & Wilson, 1996; Strayhorn, 2011; Kuh, Cruce, Shopu, & Kinzie, 2008; Chartrand, 1992; Woosley & Miller, 2009; West, Shulock, & Moore, 2012), socioeconomic demographics, and degree of academic and social integration (Melguizo, 2011; Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1993).

Wang et al. (1994) define educational resilience as the likelihood of success in school and in other life accomplishments, despite environmental adversities, brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences (p. 46). Unlike persistence, educational resilience must include the presence of risk or adversity (Masten & Reed, 2002). Risk refers to any condition that increases the likelihood of developing a problem (Green & Conrad, 2002). Adversity is a state or instance of serious or continued difficulty or misfortune (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Resilience is fluid and expressed through behavior and identity (Payne, 2011). Also, unlike persistence, resilience can be defined as more than an outcome. According to Payne (2011), resiliency can be described as a process

which changes over time. Unlike academic persistence, educational resilience is a relational and dynamic psychological process not solely dependent upon the presence of traditional persistence factors for student success. Patterns of resiliency or particular adaptations made by individuals or groups should be contextualized or understood across time, as well as in relation to the structural conditions of the individual's or group's local community. Payne (2011) goes on to state that "new, more diverse, and more adequate framings of resiliency and resilience are needed and, at the very least, should take into account the intersections of lived experience, gender, developmental period, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and historical and environmental factors" (p. 434).

Perhaps a more fitting definition of personal resilience that best relates to this study is given by Franklin (1999): "the individual's effective management of the hassles of daily life, cumulating over one's life history, which enhances one's adaptive repertoire and efficacy in coping strategies" (p. 781). Payne (2011) identified that Franklin's (1999) definition takes into account the cumulative or historical impact of racism and other related factors. For this study, resilience in the theoretical context of critical race theory and critical race feminism captures understanding in terms of how resilient adult African American women undergraduates made sense of their experience as women and African Americans in relation to their adverse environmental and social conditions.

The fluid and dynamic nature of resilience is compatible to the variations of adaptability that changes over time for resilient adult African American women undergraduates as they experience one form of adversity to the next, expressed through their behaviors and identity. As adults, African American women also carry a repertoire of coping strategies over their life histories. Experienced racism and cultural identity is

considered in terms of the adversity resilience would address. Therefore, the use of resilience for this study instead of persistence affords a richer, more insightful concept in which to examine the lived experiences of adult African American women undergraduates attending predominantly White institutions.

### Persistence Theories and Adult African American Women

Current persistence theories have been spinoffs of Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of student departure, which focused on student social and academic integration with the classroom at the center. Several researchers (Kasworm, 2005; Tierney, 2002) however, have found that traditional persistence theory is not useful for non-traditional students in PWIs because it legitimizes one culture over another. Attinasi (1989, 1994) argued that a qualitative study should be applied to address a theory of student departure. In addition, several critiques now call for including a cultural perspective and different theoretical considerations for the study of minority students (Attinasi, 1989, 1994; Rendon et al, 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1991, 1992, 1993; Kuh & Love, 2000).

Since no one specific persistence theory effectively addresses the adversity involved in the collegiate experience of adult Black women, an exploration on their resilience more appropriately weighs in on how they persist. Actually a subset of persistence, resilience affords a means of viewing deeper layers of the processes leading to persistence. Additionally, resilience offers a psychological approach to academic success that persistence study alone cannot answer. Educational resilience includes the presence or development of a set of protective factors enabling the student to adapt and learn from perceived risks and threats experienced at a specific moment and stage in life

(Morales, 2000; Masten, 1994; 2001; Luthar, Cichetti, & Becker, 2000; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007).

To counter the majoritarian deficit way of thinking that African Americans are biologically and culturally limited, the resilience phenomena is a preferable choice for which to apply a critical framework. Similar to an anti-deficit achievement framework, resilience also enables a better understanding of how academic success may be achieved. How educational resilience develops depends upon one's human ability to adapt, resolve problems, control emotions, and form close supportive ties with others (Grotberg, 1997; Fine, 1984; Gladwell, 2008).

#### Educational Resilience of African American College Students

The term resilience has evolved in context since formal research began in 1972 (Garmezy & Neuchterlein). Early studies were grounded in vulnerability and deficit assumptions (O'Leary, 1998; O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 1998), meaning academic failure outcomes of minorities were considered inevitable. Research on African American resilience (Barbarin, 1993; Miller, 1999; Miller & MacIntosh, 1999; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007; Brown, 2008) evolved from vulnerability to viewing educational resilience of African Americans grounded in what is called invulnerability.

Vulnerability refers to inability to adapt and learn from faced adversity and perceived risks. Invulnerability is the opposite outcome of vulnerability, where resilience is developed from adaptation to adversity and perceived risks. Since recent studies (e.g., Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams II, 2007; Brown & Tylka, 2011) stress the importance of several constructs of protective coping factors such as spirituality, racial socialization, and social support systems, then an analysis of the educational resilience of African

American women should combine these coping factors. Such coping factors are utilized in response to perceptions or identification of racial bias in the context of predominantly White institutions. Before expanding upon what the literature says about how African American women utilize these coping factors, it is important to discuss what characteristics are considered conducive to resilience.

#### Characteristics Conducive to Educational Resilience in Higher Education

Some educational resilience researchers (e.g. Masten et al., 1990; Masten, 2001) propose that resilience characteristics are part of a student's personal makeup. Characteristics conducive to resilience are a combination of the following: a positive attitude and social competence (Masten, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992; Worland, Weeks, & Janes, 1987), intelligence (Anthony, 1987; Masten, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992), being confident, optimistic, and goal-oriented (Bernard, 1991; Masten, 1994), perceiving life as meaningful, and possessing high self-efficacy (Bernard, 1993; Masten, 1994). See table 1. Some individuals are nurtured in environments that teach them to be resilient and foster this ability to overcome difficulties (McCreary, Cunningham, Ingram, & Fife, 2006) A resilient person may not display all characteristics simultaneously, but resilient characteristics are revealed as adverse situations present themselves in any given place and time. These characteristics contribute to the inner strength possessed by some adult African American women in overcoming adversity. In addition to internal factors, coping strategies are learned and developed over time through experiential learning and relationships.

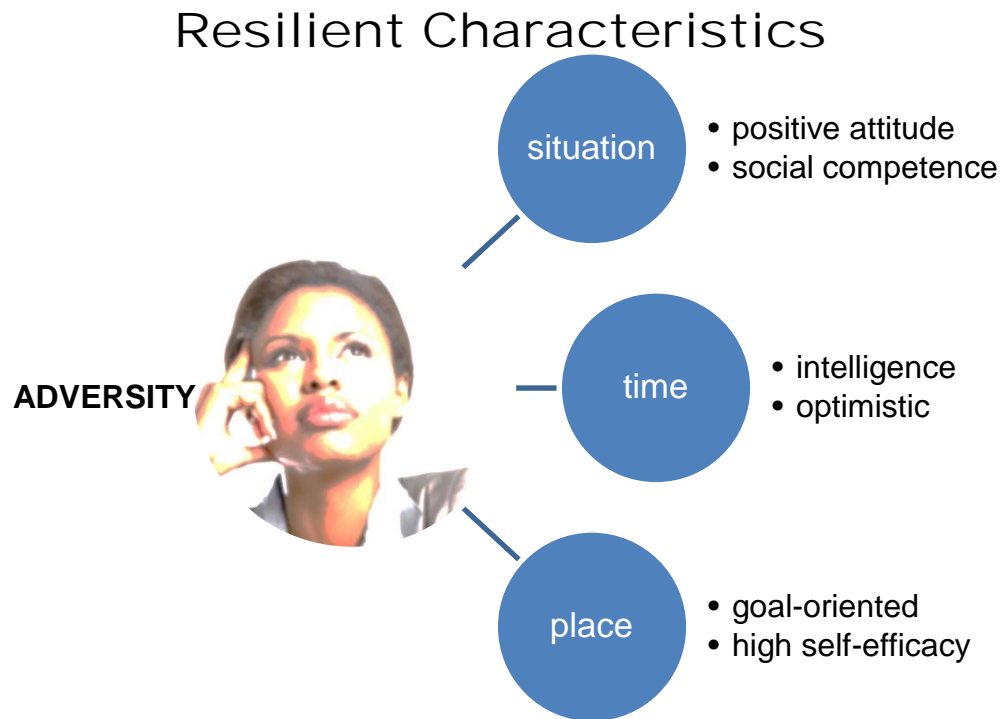


Figure 1. Characteristics Conducive to Educational Resilience in Higher Education

### Coping Strategies

Coping strategies dealing with the marginalization and degradation adult African American women experience can be either negative, like drug or alcohol abuse, violence, or depression; or, they can be positive ones such as embracing one's spirituality or social support networks (Brown, 2008). Resiliency studies regarding coping, and pertinent to the present endeavor, specifically examined external processes utilized by adult Black women for survival in their academic world and society at large (Johnson Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Brown, 2008; Case & Hunter, 2012). An exploration of these follows.

## *Spirituality*

Spirituality has long been positively associated with effective coping (Bryant-Davis, 2005; El-Khoury et al., 2004; Jackson, 1995; Kynard, 2010; Nunley, 2004, 2006). Dancy's (2010) study claims African Americans filter many important life decisions such as college attendance and career choices through their spirituality and spiritual identity. Researchers (Constantine, Gainor, Ahluwalia, & Berkel, 2003; Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, Lewis-Coles, 2002; Jackson & Sears, 1992; Myers, 1992, 1993; Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000; Watson, 2006) imply the importance of spirituality for Blacks is based upon the African principals of communalism, unity, and harmony. In the area of higher education, Phillips (2000) reported religious affiliation and frequency of spiritual practice were positively related to African American student's adjustment to college; greater levels of adjustment lead to greater academic success.

In Patton and McClure's (2009) *Strength in the Spirit: A Qualitative Examination of African American College Women and the Role of Spirituality During College*, spirituality was found to be a source of strength for 14 African American undergraduate women – seven attending a large urban research university and seven attending a mid-sized religious-based Midwestern. A phenomenological approach within a Black feminist theoretical framework revealed how the women linked spirituality with their cultural identity. In one case, a student even altered her view of church because her way of thinking was transformed by a newfound openness to exploration (Patton & McClure, 2009).

This study also found that family, specifically mothers and grandmothers, most influenced the students' spiritual development. Patton and McClure (2009) recommended



that administrators search their own spirituality before attempting to mentor and offer spiritual support to their students. Not to say that this is less significant for other races, but for African American women seeking such guidance, this is extremely important. Several ideas not yet addressed in the literature are whether adult African American women that attend PWIs also serve as the influential source of their family's spirituality, whether spirituality is a prime ingredient of their social network and whether spirituality is the main source of their resilience. Other coping strategies involve locations where social networks can meet in a secure environment.

### *Counterspaces*

In addition to spirituality, counterspaces, safe havens of confidentiality, are areas of social support where students can better cope with stress related to lack of acceptance or fitting in, cultural conflict, mistrust of the institution, racism, and stigma (Nuñez, 2011; Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). This can be physical place, an organized group, a virtual space of communication, or one-on-one communication with a peer or counselor. Examples of counterspaces are hush harbors and sister circles (which will be discussed later in more detail).

Case and Hunter's (2012) study on adaptive responses to oppression took a critical look at the function of counterspaces from a psychological perspective. It referred to adaptive responding as a function combining the processes of coping, resilience, and resistance at both the individual and setting levels. The researchers propose counterspaces are radical sites that serve as a place in which marginalized individuals can openly convey, circumvent, resist, counteract, and/or mitigate the psychological consequences of their oppression. Within these spaces groups of people strategize on an individual level

one-on-one, or group level, on how to act on and change oppressive societal structures. - Resistance narratives, writings that contradict or challenge majority assumptions, have spawned from counterspaces and have spawned resistance narratives, challenging majority assumptions, where one could freely speak of what could be, in the face of what is (Maton & Brodsky, 2011; Brodsky, 2003). Counterspaces, hidden spaces of consciousness, as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) calls them, also prepare individuals to respond to oppression by affirming their capabilities to overcome it.

### *Hush Harbors*

Another form of counterspace, hush harbor comes from the period during antebellum America where African American slaves practiced an underground religion, keeping it secret from their masters (Raboteau, 2004; Nunley, 2011). According to Nunley (2011), hush harbors are camouflaged or hidden locations through which Black people speak “the unspoken, sing their own songs to themselves in their own communities” (p. 3). Hush harbors are places where open emotional expression of experienced oppression and adversity are allowed. On college campuses, hush harbors take the form of African American support or informational groups, recognized campus organizations, or virtual online groups or blogs.

### *Sister Circles*

A third form of counterspace, sister circles are confidential support and informational groups that draw upon the strength and courage found in African American women's friendship networks (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Originating within the Black church and the Black women's club movement, numerous African American organizations have used sister circles with varying degrees of success to raise awareness

of health issues of significance to African Americans (Black Women Health Imperative, 2010; Neal-Barnett, 2003). The prevalence of many of these health concerns are attributed to racial stress. Sister circles may provide a viable way to educate the African American female community about panic attacks and teach strategies that will lessen the number, intensity, and impact panic attacks and other health issues, have on their lives (Gaston, Porter, & Thomas, 2007).

A multisite quasi-experimental study on sister circles by Gaston, Porter, and Thomas (2007) evaluated 11 sites of groups called Prime-Time Sister Circles, whose purpose was to provide intervention for 134 mid-life Black women with health risks due to inactivity, poor nutrition and stress. The groups provided a sister-to-sister context, which enabled a cultural and gender-specific approach. The goal was to tap into the unique values and preferences of African American women. Participants were recruited from a workshop regarding the health risks of African American women. Ten sister circle groups and two comparison groups were studied at 11 sites. Three forms of quantitative instruments were used. The first one was a 13-item survey inquiring about health and wellness and self-care. The second quantitative instrument was a 10-item nutrition measure of the women's eating habits. The third quantitative instrument was a 7-item inventory that rated their health attitudes. Qualitative methods used to gather more in depth data were focus groups and two sessions of semi-structured interviews. The data revealed the women's thoughts, aspirations, and attitudes about what they felt they needed most, specifically more stress management techniques. The women enjoyed sharing their life experiences and giving and receiving support to one another. Research

on this interventional and nurturing approach is lacking in the higher education context; especially for adult women attending PWIs.

### *Racial Socialization*

Another means of sharing life experiences and offering support is by racial socialization (Brown, 2008; Thomas 1999). Racist experiences affect the self-concepts of African Americans and are reflected in their relationships. Racial socialization is the process of preparing children and adolescents to develop positive self-concepts in a hostile environment (Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Ngyen, & Sellers, 2008). It involves the development and reinforcement of racial and cultural pride. As a positive coping strategy that raises self-esteem, racial socialization allows African Americans to better handle racist experiences (Bynum et al., 2007; Neblett et al., 2006) by acting as a buffer to the negative impact of racial discrimination.

As a key contributor to racial socialization, family is an extremely important external protective factor impacting resiliency (Herndon and Hirt, 2004). Personal experiences of racism tend to make many Blacks treasure the values of acceptance, love, charity, and tolerance (Thomas, 1999). As children, Blacks are taught by their parents and other adults how to handle racist situations and discrimination. As mothers and nurturers, adult African American women play an active role in teaching their children, as well as advising each other on how to positively cope within a hostile environment of racist experiences. Positive aspects of their cultural heritage are also taught via personal stories, books and media, or just by conversation across generations.

Personal racist experiences vary to different degrees for different women (Collins, 2000). With each incident they negotiate how they will react and how they will use their

experiential knowledge for future reference. This is part of their resiliency, which they impart with their children. Brown (2008) looked at how the combination of the constructs of racial socialization and social support impact the resiliency of African Americans. Instruments were used to measure three factors of interest – resiliency, social support, and racial socialization - and to look for correlations among the three.

The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003) used a five-point Likert scale to measure an individual's level of resiliency in the face of adversity., The 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support ( Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) measured the students' perceptions of social support adequacy from their family, friends, and significant others. This may include influential adults outside of one's family. The third instrument used was the Teenager Experience of Racial Socialization Scale (Stevenson et al., 2002) to measure racial socialization messages participants have heard from parents or caregivers and the frequency of such messages. The TERS used a 3-point Likert scale response, ranging from *never* (1) to *lots of times* (3).

Participating young African American adults consisted of 108 females and 45 males. After an analysis using hierarchical multiple regression, results showed resiliency to be positively related to both social support and racial socialization. Brown (2008) also discussed the importance of social support where family instills cultural pride socialization. This is where racial socialization messages emphasizing racial pride and learning about one's heritage and culture is taught to Black children and reinforced to adults (Hughes et al. 2006). Support outside the family was found in the church, the community, and non-family relationships. Further recommended research consisted of

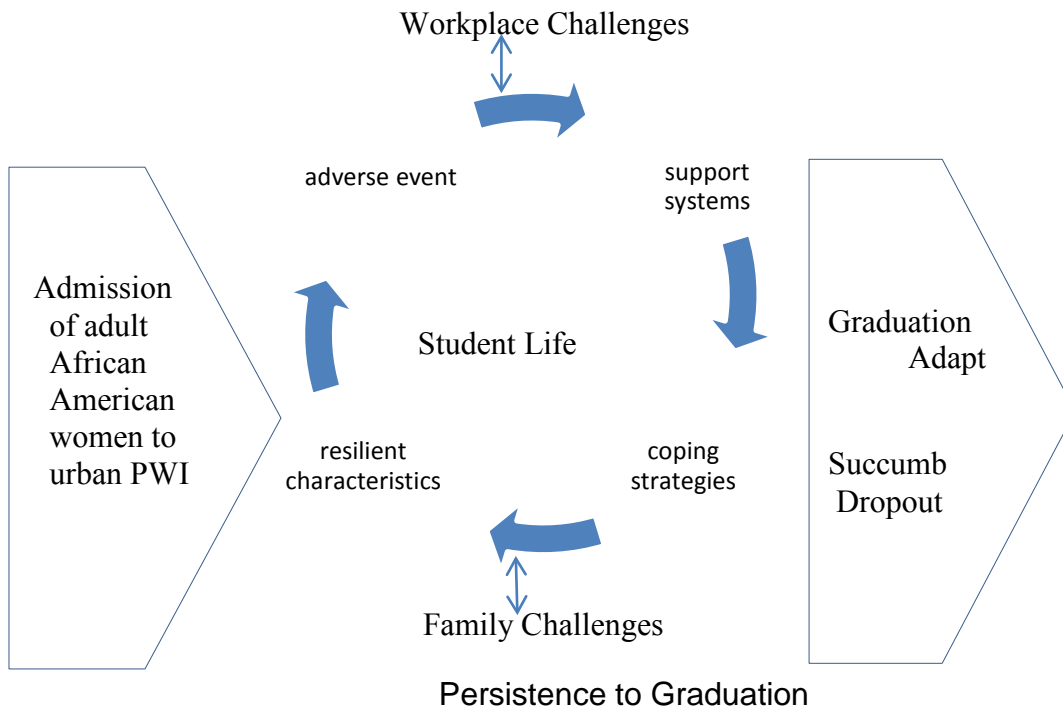
expanded knowledge of the role of racial socialization and social support in the community and by the relationship between racial socialization and individuals that make up African American social support networks.

The link between the following two theories ties in adult experiences into the equation. From the perspective of counseling adult students, resilience theory shares some similarities to Schlossberg transition theory (1981) because it provides information on adults' coping strengths and weaknesses during transitions that occur within stages in life as a means of reducing stress. As previously mentioned of resilience, transition theory also stresses the importance of a social support system, coping strategies, personal characteristics and self-efficacy. Instead of referring to a situation, resilience theory speaks of an adverse event and to adaptation instead of transitioning. Schlossberg (1981) gave examples of marriage or divorce as stressful adult life-stage transitions. For purposes of this study, added experiences are race and gender oppression.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Traditional persistence theories, such as Tinto's (1975, 1993) student attrition theory of integration, are not applicable to African American students because they call for total assimilation into the collegiate environment and do not take cultural differences into account (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Persistent theories also tend to focus on viewing African Americans as at-risk students. Therefore, it becomes clear that another conceptual framework with an anti-deficit approach may better recognize the uniqueness of conflicted cultural realities between the adult African American woman's personal life and the college setting (Kasworm, 2002). The various

dimensions of the resilient adult African American woman's undergraduate experience are graphically shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Proposed conceptual framework of factors affecting or contributing to the educational resilience of adult African American women at an urban PWI

### Anti-Deficit Inquiry

Anti-deficit inquiry sheds insight into strategies marginalized students, such as adult African American women undergraduates, use to combat stereotype threats on campus (Harper, 2012), discovering who or what attributed to their achievements (Weiner, 1985), and development of their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Anti-deficit inquiry also recognizes students of color as experts on their experiential realities, and empowers them to offer counternarratives concerning their academic success (Harper, 2009; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Counternarratives are perspectives that

run opposite or “counter” to the presumed order and control (Stanley, 2007). This study aims to answer remaining questions as to how, despite adversity, some adult African American women obtained their bachelor degrees.

### The Critical Approach in Higher Education

It is important to acknowledge the significance of race in higher education. Although this study is about resilience, discussion of the African American female higher education experience cannot exclude perceived racism and discrimination. Brayboy, Castagno, and Maughan (2007) state that ignoring race overlooks the fact that boundaries between success and failure, and poverty and privilege, are drawn across racial lines. Racism is about institutional power that has contributed to the systemic oppression of communities of color (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2005). Legal rationales such as color-blind, diversity and remedial are used to camouflage legal forms of privilege based on gender, class, phenotype, accent, language, sexuality, immigrant status, and surname (Carbado, 2002). Racism also supersedes the rights of persons of color in terms of the federal courts' failure to consistently provide remedy for past government-sanctioned discrimination such as slavery for African Americans or violation of treaty rights in terms of land acquisitions for Native Americans. As a matter of fact, there has been considerable discussion of race and racism in adult education (Burden, Harrison, & Hodge, 2005; Closson, 2010; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Williams & Evans-Winter, 2005).

### Critical Race Theory and Adult African American Women in Higher Education

CRT in education analyzes the challenges and effects of race and racism on educational structures, practices, and discourses. (Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker,



2002; Yosso et al., 2004). Critical race theory proposes that racism is reality and must be acknowledged in order to understand the ways in which legal and educational theory, policy, and practice are used to hold back people of color, while maintaining White supremacy in the United States (Solórzano, 1997; 1998). Going beyond explaining what racism is and how it operates, what makes CRT “critical” is that its goal is to combat and decrease social inequalities. It challenges what is considered to be historical truth. It also addresses the dominant societal notion that skin color predetermines intellectual ability. Critical race theory spoke to the experience of adult African American women in academia. As Rosales and Person (2003) recognized in their report on the programming needs and student services for African American women, it is a myth that Black women have achieved high levels of educational and career attainment over the past twenty years. Usual comparisons to the strides of White women and Black men have overshadowed Black women’s continued lack of movement toward achievement (Sokoloff, 1992). Best described as two concepts used by Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000), the first concept calls for a move away from a colorblind pedagogy and for recognition that racial and gender inequality requires more than educational opportunity and also calls for a social and political restructure. The second concept implies that there is a normalcy among White faculty that needs to be exposed in order to examine the White privilege that contributes to racism.

#### *Tenets of Critical Race Theory*

There are five tenets of CRT. Racism is a part of American society. CRT challenges the dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, centrality of experiential knowledge, and interdisciplinary perspectives across epistemologies that question

accepted histories. The first assumption, endemic racism, assumes that race and racism is engrained as a normal part of American society (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In other words, racism targets conditions of our society, looking beyond actions perpetrated by individuals (Delgado, 1995). Race and racism are important factors to define and explain the experiences of people of color, often acting in conjunction to other subjectivities such as gender or sexuality, or what is called intersectionality (Solórzano, 1997; 1998). Race and gender intersect in terms of the African American women's experience; the bottom line is that American society views her as part of two marginalized groups that are considered lower than Black males and White women – Black and female.

The second assumption is the challenge to dominant ideology or a critique of liberalism (Solórzano, 1997). Claims of American society being a meritocracy, colorblind and neutral is a façade that merely camouflages the self-interest, power, and privilege of the dominant group. By looking at racism as an overt act instead of being part of the societal structure, its existence would be less doubtful and there would be less acceptance of the myth of a nonracist society. As a result of subtle racism engrained in institutional policies and curricula, White instructors, for example, bear no accountability and are at risk of unfairly discriminating (Closson, 2010). Patton (2005) referred to this attitude towards the presence of racism as civility.

The third tenet is the commitment to social justice. The goal is to eliminate racism with the broader goal of ending oppression of all kinds. It seeks to empower people of color and other subordinated groups (Freire, 1970, 1973; Lawson, 1995; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This tenet aims to expose the “interest convergence” of civil

rights gains in education (Bell, 1987). Interest convergence is an argument that suggests that things in the larger culture change only when the interests of the dominant groups and the subordinated groups converge. These interests are sometime subtle and sometimes they are obvious (Bell, 1987; Taylor, 2000). For example, a subtle form of dominant group influence is college institutional racism typically minimizes its existence by suggesting that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances (Bonilla-Silva's , 2009). An example of obvious interest convergence is the argument of reverse discrimination with college admissions.

The fourth tenet is experiential knowledge (Solórzano, 1997). Increasingly used by educational scholars to analyze education, CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination (Delgado Bernal, 2002) because they have been left out of dominant narratives. This experiential knowledge is communicated by means of storytelling of family histories, biographies, scenarios and narratives of lived experiences (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2003).

An interdisciplinary perspective is the fifth tenet. This tenet crosses methodological and epistemological boundaries by stressing the importance of looking at institutional policies in historical and contemporary contexts. In other words, CRT recognizes that U.S. racial relations move through historical cycles of progress followed by periods of discord; therefore, historical and social theories are important in the analysis Solórzano, 1997; 1998). Some CRT scholars (Delgado, 1984, 1992; Garcia, 1995; Harris, 1994; Olivas, 1990) also list challenging ahistoricism as a sixth tenet. Ahistoricism refers to a lack of concern for history, historical development, or tradition of

marginalized people. An interdisciplinary perspective best lends itself to this tenet because it is important to understand race and racism in historical and contemporary contexts (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006).

### Critical Race Feminism and Adult African American Women in Higher Education

A more specific and customized paradigm for this study, critical race feminism (CRF) contributes sociological and historical lenses to the experiences of Black women (Few, 2007). It examines the intersection of race, class and gender in their experiences but does not limit itself to any one racial and/or ethnic group. The educationally resilient Black woman relates to aspects of CRF in the sense that she is strong, courageous, and inquisitive. She is keenly aware of a pseudo-racist curriculum, which unfortunately makes up a huge part of her collegiate experience as an adult student, and primary source of campus interaction. She is also aware of, and deals with, stereotypical beliefs about her physical appearance, behavior, intellectual capabilities and attitude from faculty and her peers. Thompson (1998) argues that once White theorists and educators learn how to read and immerse themselves in Black literature and other forms of culture, without assimilating African American women to the White cultural experience, more informed understanding can take place.

According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000), the experiences of everyday Black women are central to understanding their needs, desires, and places in society. Research offering additional strategies for coping, personal development may surface, or serve as an advocacy source for those students of color who are less resilient. O'Connor (2002) expressed the need to examine institutions, policies, and social interactions and their expression in a particular space and time" (p. 856) to address institutional and societal

racism as it related to resilience and adversity. Qualitative studies using the experiences and knowledge of the participants can best address this gap.

### *Tenets of Critical Race Feminism in Education*

CRF in education is useful to the research of Black women in education in the several ways. Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010) mention five tenets that express its theoretical purpose. Firstly, CRF is a movement that claims that women of color's experiences are different than those of men of color and those of White women. Secondly, CRF focuses on the lives of women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination as a result of intersections of race, class, and gender within a system dominated by White male patriarchy and racist oppression. Thirdly, CRF asserts that women of color have, and deal with, multiple identities and consciousness. The notion of a multiple consciousness comes from where Black women learn to adapt in order to survive in a racist society and at the same time they must hold on to their own beliefs and values and remain aware of those of their oppressor. Fourthly, CRF is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth. The fifth tenet of CRF calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression. Again, all these tenets can contribute to describing the African American women's academic experience.

### SUMMARY OF CHAPTER II

The literature has shown that there is very limited research specifically focused on the educational resiliency of adult African American female undergraduates at PWIs. Three key elements identified in the literature regarding the resilience of adult African American women undergraduate are the recognition of race and gender discrimination, resilience characteristics, and coping strategies that enhance resilience. One gap

discovered is the lack of research on adult African American women undergraduates. The women involved in most of the empirical studies were either young adults (Brown & Tylka, 2011) or a mix of women over several generations (O'Connor, 2002).

All the empirical research agreed with what Guy (1999) states regarding African American adult students: “It is urgent that adult educators explore creative and culturally relevant approaches to serving marginalized adult learner populations, because their numbers as students are projected to grow through the middle of the next century” (p. 98). The research has shown that we need to move away from persistence theories that do not apply to adult students – especially adult students of color. A study on their educational resilience in the wake of their experienced adversities offers more applicable explanations to their persistence.

The second gap in the literature was the limited use of critical perspective when it comes to making sense of the experiences of adult African American women undergraduates. The literature justifies the basis for a critical race theoretical framework with some areas also comparable to critical black feminism. Whereas CRT-framed research was applied to challenge the master narrative assumption that the academic success of people of color was attributed to assimilation to the dominant culture (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007; Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), BFT was used in articles that specifically address the societal challenges of African American women as both African American and as a woman – in other words, her intersectionality in American society. This was something CRT alone could not offer (Donovan, 2011; Patton & McClure, 2009; McCandless, 201; Simien, 2004; Smith, 2009; Souto-Manning & Ray,

2007; Willingham, 2011; Zamani, 2003). Exploring potential additional areas that may contribute to African American women's educational resilience may be revealed through use of their counter narratives. To add to the understanding of how adult African American women cope as undergraduates and how they make sense of their experiences, we need to listen to their stories as only they can tell them (Bell, 1987; Carrasco, 1996; Delgado, 1989, 1995; Olivas, 1990).

The chapters that follow will describe the research methodology of the study, analysis and results of the collected data, and finally, a discussion of implications to adult student services at PWIs as they apply to Black women. The study will conclude with suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER III

### INTRODUCTION

An exploration of the literature indicated the need to better understand the college experiences of adult African American women while attending a predominately White institution (e.g., O'Connor, 2002; Williams & Nichols, 2012; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). Recent studies present a general introduction into the resiliency of African Americans in higher education in terms of a correlation with racial socialization (e.g., Brown & Tylka, 2011; Brown, 2008), use of culture specific coping (e.g., Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007), and social support networks (Frabutt, et al., 2002). For example, Brown & Tylka's (2011) and Brown's (2008) quantitative studies on racial socialization concluded its correlation to high levels of resilience, but suggests further exploration of other factors impacting resilience such as social support and racial identity.

Only one study to date came close to addressing the educational resilience of adult African American women undergraduates attending a predominantly White institution (O'Connor, 2002), but the context was a mid-west regional university system. The study involved the African American women's perceived constraints and opportunities as described from three generational cohorts. More detail into this related story was mentioned in Chapter II.

Upon review of the current literature, as referred to in Chapter II, two gaps became clear. The first gap was the lack of research on adult African American



undergraduates, specifically African American women's educational resiliency. Statistically, adult African American women undergraduates are a small group, resulting in their experiences becoming overlooked and their voices silenced. Although the research acknowledged the presence of racism, sexism and perceived discrimination (Brown & Tylka, 2011; O'Connor, 2002; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007), there remains a serious lack of a critical perspective to making sense of the experiences of adult African American women undergraduates. This is the second gap in the literature and where critical race and critical feminist theories apply.

Critical race theory acknowledges the experiential knowledge of people of color as legitimate, appropriate, and essential to the understanding of racial subordination (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race methodology challenges traditional research paradigms and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color. Therefore, drawing explicitly from their lived experiences is potentially a methodological strength. An offspring of critical race theory, critical race feminism addresses the multiple locations and identities that women of color inhabit (DeReus et al., 2005; Wing, 2000). As Wing (2000) stated, "identity is *not* additive. In other words, Black women are not White women plus color, or Black men, plus gender" (p. 7). Therefore, this study adapted a combined critical approach that addressed all the intersecting beings that make up adult African American women undergraduates: as African American, a woman, an adult student, an employee, a family member, and a member of a community or informal social network (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Collins, 2000; Wing, 1997; hooks, 1984).

Further expanding upon the critical paradigm, the literature is lacking on the use of counternarratives to express the lived experiences of adult African American women

undergraduates attending predominantly White institutions. Use of counternarrative analysis to recount, reflect, and give voice to the lived experiences of its participants accomplishes what Solórzano and Yosso (2002) say counternarratives achieve – they “shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 32).

Beyond the reasoning behind the methodology selection, this chapter also discusses the research steps taken for recruitment, qualitative interviews, data collection, and analysis based primarily on the counternarrative inquiry techniques of Solórzano and Yosso (2002), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Delgado Bernal (1998). This chapter is presented in the following sequence: 1) rationale for a qualitative approach, 2) the rationale for the methodology, 3) counternarrative design, (3) sampling, (4) data collection and analysis, (5) trustworthiness, (6) the researcher’s positionality, and (7) limitations.

## METHODOLOGY

### RATIONALE FOR QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for this study because this study because I sought to capture rich descriptions of the experiences of adult African American women undergraduates. Measurable, statistical data cannot describe or explore nuances of human experience and relationships (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). A qualitative study through a critical lens not only addressed the gap in the literature for hearing women’s voices but by enabling an understanding of how society functions for them opens up to finding methods by which unsatisfactory aspects of their experiences can be changed (Patton, 2002). Inherently critical, counternarratives are a means to giving voice to women in their own words. In order to achieve this, inquiry must be made in a naturalistic setting

where individuals can be observed interacting in their own environment or as Patton (2002) says, where the real world is studied “as it unfolds” for its participants in their everyday environments.

Another reason qualitative inquiry was used was because of the importance of context. Context refers to phenomena as created and maintained in a specific environment or social setting, and the interactions within (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Qualitative inquiry also allows for the researcher to be an instrument of the study, allowing his or her human side to be considered a form of strength, as well as a challenge during the research process (Patton, 2002).

Maxwell (2005) suggests the use of a theoretical framework to help access the purpose of the study and to establish appropriate research questions. For purposes of this study, extensions of social constructivism - critical race theory (CRT) and primarily critical race feminism (CRF) - were best suited because they directly address American societal discrimination of race, gender, and class, in the context of education (Austin, 1995; Closson, 2010; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). As previously mentioned, the use of CRT methodology challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color and offers transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination in our societal and institutional structures (Creswell, 2007, p. 28).

A critical approach methodology, based within the framework of critical race feminism (CFR), was selected to add an extra layer into examining the experiences of adult African American women undergraduates as African American women. Speaking of their experiences involves intersectionality. Intersectionality refers to the complex of

reciprocal attachments that navigate among dimensions of race, gender and class in society (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; University of California Center for New Racial Studies, 2011). In the context of critical race feminism (CRF), intersectionality describes the multiple oppressions of sexism, racism and class (Crenshaw, 1993). CRF also acknowledges, addresses, and accepts women of color's experiences as different from their male counterpart (critical race theory) and their womanhood as different from other women (feminism) (hooks, 1984). CRF moves women of color from the margins to the center of the discussion, and allows reflection and research, as they co-exist in the dominant culture (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984). CRF also supports a discourse of resistance to the dominant culture in a practical way (Wing, 2000).

The existence of institutional racism in higher education remains overshadowed by educational initiatives to increase college student graduation rates and diversity workshops. Deficit-focused research on minorities remains commonplace especially in (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (McGee & Martin, 2011). There is a need for more anti-deficit-focused research to address successes in spite of the odds and predominantly White institutions. Educational resiliency research focuses on academic success in the presence of perceived risk and adversity. Few predominantly White institutions have made adjustments in the policies established at the time of their founding and maintain culturally- insensitive curriculums (Harper, 2012; Patton, 2004; Texeira 7 Christian, 2002; Greene, 2000).

This study can serve as practical means of affecting change by advocating for institutional changes that would create an environment conducive to enhancing the educational resiliency of adult African American undergraduates attending urban

predominantly White institutions. Such changes would call for a strong support system of their peers and role models, more culturally sensitive curriculum offerings, and awareness of institutional traditions' effect on them within the collegiate environment (Rosales & Person, 2003). Solutions could potentially be derived from interviews with study participants that aid the transition in college from admissions to graduation from college, and establish meaningful relationships.

### COUNTERNARRATIVES

Use of the counternarrative was best suited for the theoretical framework of this study. Inspired by critical race theory, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) introduced “counter-storytelling” for education research to challenge current researchers to find a more effective way to better understand those at the margins of society (Anzaldúa, 1990). Counternarratives challenge the dominant master narratives that have been generally accepted as universal truths about particular groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Majoritarian stories were developed from a history of racial privilege and are accepted as natural (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Majoritarian stories are also stories of other forms of privilege such as gender and class. Harper (2009) points out that the goal of counternarratives is not to focus on convincing the White mainstream that racism exists but to reflect on the lived experiences of racially and socially marginalized people of color. It is a means of stretching the boundaries of the White mainstream to give voice, perspective and consciousness to those previously suppressed, devalued and abnormalized (Delgado, 1999). This study proposed to raise consciousness about the racialized experiences of adult women of color undergraduates and the resiliency strategies they employed to persist. Meaning and understanding how they make sense of

their experiences was voiced through the counternarratives they shared. Truths were revealed that countered the myths of what was assumed to be the truth about them and their experiences.

### Functions of Counternarratives

The counternarrative encompasses the following elements of critical race theory (or CRT), as summarized by Solórzano and Yosso (2002). The first one is the intersectionality of racism with other forms of subordination. For example, gender and class discrimination are intertwined with individual experiences of race and racism (Crenshaw, 1993). The challenge to dominant ideology is the second tenet. In other words, there is skepticism as to whether traditional claims of true colorblindness, meritocracy and neutrality really exist in educational institutions. Instead, critical race theorists reject these notions and expose deficit-informed research that “silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” (Delgado Bernal, 1998). The third tenet, the centrality of experiential knowledge, recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color as legitimate and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the context of education, CRT challenges traditional research paradigms and theories used to explain the experience of people of color (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). A commitment to social justice is the fourth tenet of critical race methodology that seeks to end racism, sexism, and poverty, and at the same time, empower subordinated minority groups (Matsuda, 1991). The fifth tenet is the transdisciplinary perspective. CRT challenges the historical perspective and cross disciplinary analysis of race and racism by placing them within a specific methodological base that addresses such effects on people of color.

Therefore, another one of the goals of this study was to “counter” higher education’s dominant discourse and narratives and de-emphasize adult African American women’s deficit portrayals (Harper, 2009).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identify three types of counternarratives: personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories. Personal stories or narratives are autobiographical accounts of an individual’s experiences with various forms of racism and sexism using a critical race analysis (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, author Margaret Montoya’s (1994) personal reflections as a Latina are told in the context of legal discourse. The second type of counternarrative, other people’s narratives, offers a biographical analysis of a person of color in relation to American institutions and in a sociohistorical context. Examples of other people’s narratives can be found in the works of Lawrence and Matsuda (1997) and Fernandez’s (2002) telling stories about school, utilizing critical race and Latino critical theories. The third type of counternarrative is a composite narrative. Composite narratives are derived from various forms of data. As with personal and other person’s narratives, composite narratives recount the subordinations of sexism, racism and classism through the form of composite characters. The works of Solórzano and Yosso (2000, 2001) and Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) are examples of the use of composite counternarratives of urban Chicano and Chicana students in a critical race and Latino Critical theory framework.

Of these types, the personal stories counternarrative was selected for this study because the real-life experience of one participant is unlikely to be the same experience for all. Participants’ real-life experiences will in turn be compared to the research that is currently published about them and analyzed using a critical race feminist approach. An

example of personal narrative counterstories utilizing a critical race feminist perspective (CRF) is Ngunjiri's study (2007), who used portraiture as her CRF method, resulting in a self-transformation of the researcher. By self-transformation, Ngunjiri referred to how her attitude toward the project went from merely a research assignment and became a personal commitment to social justice for African women after interviewing sixteen women ranging in age from 40 to 80 years old who spoke of their challenges (p. 7). The depth of analysis involved per person in this study did not require the need for as large a number of participants. The personal counternarratives of the adult African American women undergraduate participants in this study may not immediately advocate social justice for the study participants, but may bring about the awareness for the need to start a dialogue and additional anti-deficit research on this unique college student group.

#### RESEARCH SITE

This research site was selected for practical and applicable reasons. PWI Southeast (or PWI-SE<sup>2</sup>) is an urban four-year university with the goal of becoming a preeminent research university. By Fall 2012 PWI-SE had an enrollment of 22,293 students. Of that population, 15,893 were undergraduates. White students made up 74.7% of the total student population. African Americans made up 10.4% were African American, and all other minorities were 9.7% of the total student population. PWI-SE's academic programs attract students from every state and from all over the world.

In recent years, PWI-SE has added diversity and adult-sensitive initiatives to its mission, while at the same time, raised its academic admissions standards (the average ACT score was 25.0 in 2012). PWI-SE sponsors community outreach programs,

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<sup>2</sup> All institutional and participant names are pseudonyms.



primarily in the economically poorer west end of the city. The university has The Bachelor of Science in Organizational Management (BSOM) program. The BSOM program is designed for working adults who have at least five years of experience in the workplace or teaching in various career fields. A good source for accessing adult African American women for this study, the program's classes are offered online, or in convenient off-campus locations, Monday through Thursday evenings in the city, and on a nearby Army base.

### SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Purposeful sampling was used for this study (Patton, 2006). Creswell (2008) suggests that purposeful selected participants are chosen based upon how well they may be able to answer the research questions. Through purposeful sampling, a list of attributes that were essential to the study was created to guide recruitment of participants who met these criteria. The criteria for participants for this study included women who identify themselves as African Americans, age 25 and over, full or part-time employed, and recently graduated.

#### Sample Size

The purpose here was to gather perceptions and feelings rather than objective facts. Thus out of 20 targeted subjects, six agreed to participate and proved adequate for generating data which gave an "authentic insight into people's experiences" (Silverman, 1993).

#### Participant Recruitment

To recruit participants, the researcher requested university faculty and administrators with the BSOM program to provide a list of students at PWI-SE that met

the aforementioned criteria (Appendix A). Sources included the undergraduate programs most likely to have a sufficient population of adult African American women such as Project Graduate and the B. S. in Organizational Management program. Phone calls and websites were used to identify the appropriate program faculty and administrators to contact. University faculty and administrators of these programs received a letter of introduction that included a description of the research study (Appendix A). The letter was in electronic form as a Word document which faculty and program administrators could email to their students.

If enough participants were not recruited, the researcher asked current participants to refer the researcher to other potential participants. This snowball sampling (Hays & Singh, 2012) helped identify additional people through their relationships with other potential study participants. Other options used were the daily university news email announcements that had a broad distribution to faculty, staff, and students. Another means of recruiting participants were through posts on the university daily listserv with broad distribution to faculty, staff, and students.

#### CONSENT AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The study proposal was submitted to the PWI-SE's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for formal approval by the Human Subjects Protection Program Office. Upon receipt of IRB approval, research officially began. Participants who agree to the interviews were reassured by the researcher that all communications would be kept strictly confidential and their identity remained protected. A letter of introduction (Appendix C) was given to the study participants to read, both via email and in person, prior to the first interview session. At the time of the first interview session, a

demographic sheet (Appendix E) was given to be completed by study participants to obtain demographic information. The researcher shared her personal story and explained the purpose of the study to help put participants at ease. Each participant signed two copies of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B). One copy was returned to the researcher. The other copy was kept by the participants for their records. An interview guide was used to organize my interviews (Appendix D). It included a demographic sheet (Appendix E) and questions in alignment with the critical –based protocols (critical race theory and critical race feminism).

## DATA COLLECTION

Six recruited participants had a minimum of three sessions. The first session was for introductory purposes, meaning the study was formally introduced, signed consents were obtained from each participant, and pseudonyms were agreed upon in order to protect their two identities. In actuality, two of the six participants had session one face-to-face with the researcher. At that time, all were asked about their past lives to get a sense of their life histories. Also gathered during session one were completed demographic questionnaires. Others responded via email for their first session.

The second session consisted of digitally- recorded interviews. The standard protocol for qualitative interviews called for three 90-minute interviews (Seidman, 2012). The purpose of this session was to reconstruct the participants' reflections of their university experiences. It called for more detailed examples of their typical day and situations portraying their experiences. Two of the six participants had face-to-face interviews for session two.

With the third session participants were asked to reflect on what their experiences meant to them and provide feedback on the transcripts of their interview. A third face-to-face interview was not possible for any of the participants due to scheduling constraints, so each was asked to review their interview transcripts and to sign a member check form that confirmed they were given the opportunity to review and approve their interview transcripts.

Creswell (2007) argued that one of the characteristics of qualitative research was the utilization of a theoretical lens to view the study. In this case, CRT and CRF lay the theoretical framework for the research questions of which the interview questions were based. For each participant's transcript, the researcher created a profile and individual narrative (Seidman, 2005). From the narratives and profiles, the researcher identified recurring topics and assign code words based upon the research questions. The qualitative data analysis software program Dedoose was used to apply code words to transcript excerpts and to identify themes.

#### COUNTERNARRATIVES ANALYSIS- INTERPRETING THE DATA

No exact counternarrative coding method currently exists. To determine what coding method or methods were more aligned with my research questions involved looking at what coding method was compatible with the use of a critical lens that challenges the master narrative, and the nature of human relationships and experiences as framed within critical race feminism. To do this required maintaining cultural sensitivity and theoretical sensitivity, as previously mentioned in Chapter 3. Additionally, narrative coding and "themeing" the data proved to be best suited for data analysis.

To create the counternarratives of the participants, two concepts were used to find and uncover sources of data. The first concept is what Strauss and Corbin (1990) calls theoretical sensitivity. A personal quality of the researcher, theoretical sensitivity is an having insight into the meaning of data and ability to discern what is or is not important. The second concept to creating the counternarrative is Delgado Bernal's (1998) notion of cultural sensitivity. Here, I went beyond my personal experiences to take in the whole cultural and community experience, taking into account the current literature, professional experiences, and engagement into the analysis process. To do this I used primary sources of individual interviews (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) to find specific concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I used the critical lens of critical race feminism and transcripts of the experiences of the adult African American women undergraduates to examine concepts of coping strategies, racial socialization, and stereotype threat (previously mentioned in Chapter II). I then looked at my data in comparison to the current literature to draw possible connections for discussion and see what emerged. After various sources of data were compiled, examined, and analyzed using the qualitative software Dedoose for identifying patterns of themes, counternarratives were formed, representative of the obtained responses and experiences.

### TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness is the “quality of an investigation and its findings that make it noteworthy to its audiences” (Schwant, 2001, p. 258). The four criteria to be considered for maintaining a trustworthy qualitative study are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is the assurance that the study participants’ views align with that of the researcher’s. Credibility is established through use of well-

established research methods (Patton, 2002). Examples of this used in this study were thick description of a phenomenon, purposeful sampling, and member checks of collected data. Also utilized in the study was the technique of triangulation. This contributed to the credibility of the study by comparing observations and field notes from interviews and checking them against other sources of data. Transferability allows for data to be compared. Dependability employs overlapping methods and in-depth methodological descriptions that allow the study to be repeated, such as the use of critical race theory and critical race feminism and what is known on educational resilience on which the research questions were based. This study involved the use of rich descriptions of the experiences of the study participants, purposeful sampling and member checks to ensure transferability. Lastly, confirmability refers to acknowledgment of researcher bias and shortcomings, thus the researcher consciously presented an objective presentation that offers clear, discernable information.

Critical approach research methods, such as critical race theory and critical race feminism, are no longer brand new and have been established in educational research as a valid methodological method. To establish trustworthiness, I applied the criteria of credibility by providing study participants with a copy of their interview transcripts to review prior to completion of the study and final analysis. Transferability was the other criteria used by establishing that the counternarratives, experiences, and coping strategies derived from the study participants can be applied to other adult African American women undergraduates and other people of color attend predominantly White college institutions. Also, findings may contribute to more institutional responsiveness to creating

an environment more conducive to educational resilience. A timeline of research steps offer a more precise view of what took place with the research procedure:

**Table 1.** *Research procedure of qualitative, critical study.*

<b>Step</b>	<b>Activity</b>
Recruitment	Contact gatekeepers at PWI Southeast for list of possible student participants that meet selection criteria.
	Send e-mail to recommended students who attended or currently attend PWI Southeast (PWI-SE) to invite them to participate in the study and to complete the demographic survey.
	For those students who accept the invitation, email them the demographic survey as an attachment.
	Arrange to meet in person with maximum of 20 students who agreed to fill out the demographic survey. If one or more students decline, have replacements as backup to assure that there remains an adequate number of students (worst case scenario).
Pre-interview	Prior to the first interview session, the researcher will note assumptions and bias she may have prior to the interviews. The researcher will review with each participant what the study is about and what the interview process will entail. Each participant will sign two copies of consent – one copy retained by the participant for their records, the other copy goes to the researcher.
Interview Sessions	<p>Conduct individual semi-structured interviews with PWI-SE students. All interview sessions are digitally recorded. Field notes are taken to retain key points raised during the interview session to facilitate data analysis during and after completion of interview sessions.</p> <p>Session 1: Introductory conversation of what the study is about; introductions between researcher and participant.</p> <p>Session 2: In depth interview with open-ended research-related questions.</p> <p>Session 2: Member check – involves participants reviewing and signing off on interview transcripts upon approval.</p>
Analysis and coding of the data	<p>Researcher analyzes transcripts of interviews from participants.</p> <p>Data analysis- Stage One: connective strategies used to form personal narratives (counternarratives in this case) representative of participants' voices (Maxwell, 2005). Incorporated in this stage were the counternarrative concepts of theoretical sensitivity (Strauss &amp; Corbin, 1990) and cultural sensitivity (Delgado Bernal, 1998).</p> <p>Data analysis-Stage Two: coding across data for themes by use of qualitative analysis software Dedoose and review of the transcripts (Saldana, 2013; Clandinin &amp; Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008;</p>

	Maxwell, 2005).
Results	<p>Researcher writes Results chapter (4) of dissertation. Results chapter has these sections, among others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative results, including comparison and contrast between participants' answers and comments.</li> <li>• Results as the data analysis ties into the theoretical framework.</li> <li>• Overall results and conclusions.</li> </ul>

#### THE RESEARCHER'S POSITIONALITY

My positionality as a researcher and an adult African American woman who attended a predominantly White urban institution puts me in a unique position to reach and share the experiences of the participants. The common bond of experience shared between researcher and participants was a strength which contributed to putting the participants at ease during the interview process. On the other hand, with this common bond of experience, in order to avoid the potential weakness of unintentionally leading the direction of the research or influencing participants' responses during the interview process, I used what Patton (2002) calls field notes and reflexivity. Field notes are comments of observations and points of interest noted during the interview. These notes were annotated in the journal to allow for critical reflections when making comparisons to the theoretical framework. Reflexivity refers to documenting thoughts and assumptions in a reflexive journal prior to the interviews and annotating reactions from both the researcher and participant of the interview experience afterwards. Use of both field notes and reflexivity enhanced the integrity of the research and made the researcher more accountable for decisions based upon the data collections phase of the study.

#### LIMITATIONS

Counternarratives are gathered from a small group of participants. I selected a sample size of 20 but the final participant number reduced to 6 that completed all phases



of the data collection process. Not conducive to a large sample size, personal counternarratives run the risk of criticism by traditional research methodology and challenge by the dominant discourse. The sample size in qualitative inquiry depends upon to what degree the research purpose is met (Merriam, 2002). The diverse levels of responses and the women themselves contributed to obtaining adequate substance to address the research questions. The small sample size of adult African American women cannot be generalized for the entire adult African American women undergraduate population (Squire, 2008) but instead, study results can be transferable to similar predominantly White institutions with adult African American women undergraduates or other students of color. Another limitation was an inconsistency in the type of interview method. Due to scheduling constraints of the participants, only two out of six interviews were face-to-face. The other four interviews had to be via phone. To compensate for the absence of visual access to these participants, more attention was given to what could be observed, such as the voice inflections in reaction to the questions and manner in which they were answered, and identification of location site of the phone interview to maintain strict privacy and confidentiality.

The third limitation was the challenge to avoid researcher bias. The women's experiences were far removed from the researcher's personal experience. I had perceived more obstacles based upon racism and sexism and experience racial microaggressions than most of them, so much so that during the conversations of the interviews, my participants asked and were surprised at my undergraduate and graduate experience and perceptions therein. Therefore, researcher's bias was avoided by wording my research questions as open-ended so to carefully remain void of presumed responses and influenced by my

personal experiences. Actively listening to the study participants, and pre and post-interview reflections on my part to ensure no misinterpretation of what the study participants actually meant. Active listening involved repeating back to the participant what was said to allow for clearer understanding of answers to the research questions.

### SUMMARY OF CHAPTER THREE

This chapter explained the critical-based theoretical framework of critical race and critical race feminism applied to this study. The rationale for the methodology, research steps and procedures, trustworthiness and limitations were discussed, in addition to the researcher's positionality. What follows in Chapter four are results of the in depth personal interviews.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents the data findings gathered from interviews of resilient adult African American women who attended an urban predominantly White university. Using a critical analysis framework based upon critical race theory (Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002) and critical race feminism (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010), this study communicates how the women made sense of their experiences as undergraduate students and how their experiences impacted their resilience. Central themes of the narratives are experienced adversities and responses to them. The main adversities were perceived racism, family challenges, and adult learner challenges. Of resilience sources, the frequent themes were religion and family support.

Expanding on these themes will help answer the following research questions for this study: (1) how do adult African American women describe their experiences at an urban predominantly White institution? (2) what adversities do adult African American women confront at an urban predominantly White institution? and (3) how do adult African American women respond to adversities throughout their undergraduate experience? This chapter begins with brief introductions of each study participant followed by narratives that highlight the variety of experiences derived from the

interviews. Next themes and subthemes derived from the data regarding adversities and sources of resilience are analyzed through excerpts of the narratives.

### Overview of Participants

An overview of the women participants in this study is provided in alphabetical order by use of the following descriptive table and followed by brief biographies of each participant.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Year of Birth</b>	<b>Current Academic Level*</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Parent</b>	<b>University Attendance Status</b>	<b>Degree Completion Date</b>	<b>Occupation while a Student</b>
<b>Alice</b>	1970	Masters Level Student	Married	Full-Time	Yes	Part-Time	2012	Technology Specialist
<b>Connie</b>	1990	Bachelor's Degree	Single – Never Married	Full-Time	No	Full-Time	2014	Express Delivery Administrator
<b>Jay</b>	1965	Masters Level Student	Divorced	Disability-Retired	Yes	Full-Time	2014	Retired
<b>Lane</b>	1959	Bachelor's Degree	Divorced	Full-Time	Yes	Full-Time	2014	Human Resources Administrator
<b>Pat</b>	1968	Bachelor's Degree	Married	Full-Time	Yes	Full-Time	2013	Administrative Assistant
<b>Tina</b>	1973	Bachelor's Degree	Divorced	Full-Time, 2 Jobs	No	Part-Time	2014	High School Administrator

\*academic level at time of interview

**Table 1.** *Participant Demographic Chart*

#### *Alice*

Alice was inspired to complete her bachelor's degree after hearing President Obama talk about a college education's role in reviving the U. S. economy and strengthening its workforce and saw where she could enroll in an online program to reach her personal goal. Alice has worked for 22 years in the information technology field, responsible for creating unique computer programming. Now in her 40s, Alice is a wife and mother of two sons. She enjoys mentoring women in the IT field and now works for the site institution, Predominantly White Institution-Southeast (PWI-SE), as an associate

director of its learning management system and associate applications. She is now pursuing a master's degree.

*Connie*

Connie is the youngest of the women in the study. Connie worked part-time for a delivery service while taking most of her courses online in the Bachelor of Science in Organizational Management program at PWI-SE. Currently she works part-time in a retail clothing store to make ends meet until other opportunities arise. At the time of this study, she had a job prospect in Chicago that she hopes is finalized soon. Her future goal is to go to graduate school.

*Jay*

Jay is a divorced mother of three sons, ages ranging from middle school to college age. She is now a full-time graduate student after retiring from the city police force. Jay first started college as a traditional student in the 1980s. She first attended PWI-SE in 1988 but dropped out when she got married and was hired full-time by the police department. Jay found a way to return to the university by taking online courses. She enjoys public relations and has a passion for counseling those in need. Jay is now in graduate school pursuing her master's degree program at PWI-SE.

*Lane*

Lane was the oldest of the women in this study. A divorced mother of two adult college students, her concerns primarily had to do with being an adult learner. Lane experienced several tragedies that affected her ability to stay in college. She dropped out the first time due to the death of her daughter. The second time Lane gave less attention to her children, focusing completely on getting her degree. After all, she thought, "They

were young adults and no longer required so much of my attention.” Lane also made a conscious decision to avoid personal relationships for fear she may have to compromise her commitment to her educational goal. Among her and her children, Lane would be the only one to graduate. She earned her bachelor’s degree in May 2014.

*Pat*

Pat moved from Georgia to a new state. She did not find a job right away and found the job market to be very competitive. She eventually went to work at PWI-SE. As an employee, she took advantage of its free tuition program. Pat did not really have a problem in the BSOM program although it was a little overwhelming at first. She considers herself a loaner in most settings. Pat acknowledged having a very supportive husband, who helped with their children and household responsibilities. Her faculty also offered much encouragement and guidance. Pat chose to take most of her courses in the classroom instead of online. Having finished her bachelor’s degree in May 2013, she is content for the moment to hold off going to graduate school.

*Tina*

Tina dropped out of college the first time because she got divorced and had to support herself. Five years later, she returned but with no less difficulty or challenges. This time she worked two full-time jobs while taking classes. Torn among work, caring for her sick father, and trying to keep up with her studies, Tina started to neglect her health and well-being. Eventually Tina’s father’s health improved and she finally was able to work one full-time job that did not require weekend work. She studied on the weekends and avoided any activity that would interfere with her studies. Tina graduated in December 2014.

What follows are the themes revealed by the narrative analysis and how these themes were utilized to answer the research questions. Narrative analysis was used to compose how the participants made sense of their experiences as well as the contrasts and similarities among their stories to answer the first research question.

### Personal Experiences at PWI-SE

Alice's experience at PWI-SE was a two-part journey. Attending the first time right out of high school was a time of isolation and overt racism. Her return carried with it the scars of her initial campus experience. She did not return for economic reasons and was already on a successful career track. Instead Alice yearned for a personal fulfillment that could only be satisfied with completion of her bachelor's degree. She did not express the same negative occurrences the second time around but concluded with what was foremost in her reflections of her undergraduate experience – the overlooked value of African American women as significant contributors to American society. Alice stressed: “We [Black women] should be able to concentrate on our education without having to take into account that we are women, or that we are Black. We are missing out on great opportunities and society is missing out on our talents.” Unlike Alice's pursuit of personal fulfillment, Connie, on the other hand, returned to college for two reasons - to set a precedent for justifying that her future children at least try college and for practical reasons such as career advancement.

Connie found working while a full-time student a very stressful time. A real homebody, “spending time with friends and family” was the most she did for fun while a student. Maintaining the resilience characteristics of being goal-oriented, Connie looked forward to the next phase of her quest:

Now I don't have to worry about my next report or assignment. The positive part is that I have my degree and I can use my skills to apply to another job, I can now focus on putting in applications and looking for a full-time job.

Looking at the goal was one thing but two of the other the participants were also stressed about being unprepared as adult learners.

Jay and Lane worried about keeping up with assignments and having the confidence in their abilities to learn new material and use of new learning technologies. Reflecting on her experience, Jay spoke of the importance of course relevance to the adult learner's life situation:

I had an organizational change class. This class was such a positive influence on me because it spoke to the students and reached them where they were in life. The instructor made us think about what we held onto from our past and ask ourselves where we wanted to go. It offered the power of reflection and introspection and how to help ourselves and our community.

This experience spoke to Jay's passion for counseling and social justice, incorporating the life experiences of the students in relevant ways.

Similarly, Lane was terrified about grasping the new technologies in and out of the classroom. Recovering from the death of a child took years but when Lane decided to return supportive and patient faculty and advisors saw her through. What stood out to her was being given the opportunity to step out of her comfort zone. She participated in some of the Muslim activities on campus as part of an African American religion and Islam class:



I was so proud of myself stepping out of my comfort zone. I was curious to learn about Black Muslims. I participated in some of the Muslim activities on U of L Campus; to my surprise I did not see one Black Muslim at the activities. I went alone, and got a chance to experience what concerns the Muslims deemed important. I'm glad the university offer diverse studies.

She was glad to see evidence of diversity and inclusiveness in and out of the classroom. Though Lane was concerned about technologies and the learning she knew she had to accomplish, she still took advantage of campus resources to stretch herself.

Pat needed her degree for job advancement. When she moved from Georgia, she could not get employment right away so for Pat, college was a good alternative to being a stay-at-home mom. Once employed, tuition remission enabled her to not worry about the cost. She wanted to stress the point to her children about not wasting opportunities like attending college while they are young:

They see the struggle from having to wait so long before going to school. I tried to give them the message that they do not want to go through what Mom's going through. I hope to lead the way to let them know that they are going to college, at least try it.

Tina also returned for practical reasons. She wanted to teach elementary school and needed additional training and courses. Returning to college after a five year recovery from divorce, Tina clearly embodied and valued her independence and self-determination in several ways; therefore, she recognized its absence. When asked if she felt the university provided the services she needed, Tina's response was unfavorable: "No, I had to feel my way around, figure it out."

These women all had various motivations for returning to school, from self-fulfillment to job advancement. However, they shared a common experience of apprehension about the rigors of their pathway, technology they would have to learn, and experienced some level of concern for the applicability and connection of coursework to their lives. Likewise, most of women talked about how their personal accomplishments in school translated to their family in some way.

### Experienced Adversities

This section answers the second research question as to what adversities adult African American women confront at PWIs. The experience of returning to college at PWI-SE proved to be an emotional and stressful time for all the participants but in various ways. Adversities included major life events that ranged from the death of a child, loss of income, and divorce. In the background of their adversities was the constant presence of intersectionality and perceived racism. Intersectionality, in context of a critical framework, refers to the interactions of racial, gendered, and class discrimination (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; University of California Center for New Racial Studies, 2011). The most prevalent adversities mentioned by the women were perceived racism, family challenges, and adult learner challenges. Examples of these adversities are expressed through the reflective narratives.

### Perceived Racism

Everyday processes of discrimination were handled in various ways by the participants. Perceived racism ranged from blatant and obvious to unintentional, and lastly, to denial as part of their experience. The only participant who acknowledged overt racism was Alice, but it was from the first time she attended PWI-SE. She spoke about

her turbulent past in order to explain why she was stronger upon her return to college. Although she graduated from high school with honors in math and science and was accepted into a prestigious minority scholars program, Alice recalled when one of her professors accused her of cheating on her exams and assumed she only got in as a token Black student. She felt isolated and alone at the university – uncertain to whom she should turn. Alice’s grades eventually became too low to maintain her scholarship:

He [the professor] would grade my tests differently and told me I did not belong there. I told my advisor about this professor. He [my advisor] told me that because he has tenure, nothing would happen to him. I eventually lost my scholarship over this.

What Alice was describing is sexism, although she did not make this claim. Few women or African Americans, for that matter, participated in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) programs in the 1980’s. The male professors may not have been open to, or comfortable with, Black female engineering students. What finally motivated Alice to come back was a feeling of inferiority and incompleteness:

I wasn’t seeking out a new career. I was doing okay in my career, but, when around my colleagues at work, I thought to myself: I don’t have my bachelor’s degree. Several of them assumed I already earned mine by this point in my career. I really didn’t want them to know. I shouldn’t feel like this, but I do.

It is probable that the privileged White society made her feel that she must be better than average, or become an overachiever, just to be considered on the same level as Whites. This is one of the outcomes of experiencing years of applied racial stereotypes. As hard

as she tried to ward it off, continuous negative comments likely led to battle-weary days that made her second-guess her own abilities.

Sometimes racism is not so obvious. For example, Jay and Tina processed their experiences as more subtle forms of racism. In the case of Jay, she perceived subtle racism as she reflected on a disagreement she had with her instructor. Her instructor's assumption of what was true about a current event clashed with Jay's experienced reality:

I had a naïve instructor who disagreed with my opinion . . . She based her statements on research studies and discounted what I said as valid. At the same time, she would not consider herself to be a racist. She assumed that everyone shared the same access, privileges, and opportunities as she and her children. Because of this, my criticisms were disputed by the professor. Because I challenged what she said in class, I felt that I was denied opportunities, particularly this study abroad program, of which this professor was on the selection committee.

Jay perceived this experience as racism because her professor discounted Jay's experiential knowledge and stood firm on her research sources. Additionally, Jay could not prove retaliation by her professor for challenging her sources, but she could not help but consider the possibility. The professor's intent was not racist but the outcome was. The absence of cultural sensitivity in the classroom, and the perceived power play of instructor verses student on the part of the professor could justify that possibility to be reality.

Similar to Jay, Tina felt she was treated differently because of her race due to how one professor graded her work:

When I had transferred to PWI-SE I had that goal to getting straight A's and when I ended getting three A's and a B, I did everything I could to earn that A. I felt I deserved an A. I spoke to a Black career counselor about this. He told me that the instructors here have an ego and are not going to let you tell them what you deserve. That was the only time I realized that there was the presence of racism here.

The message from the career counselor was that nothing could be done to address Tina's concern about her grades. The institutional power structure of the university was not to be challenged. The deliverer of the systemic racist message being a Black man also contributed to how and why Tina perceived racism. His message was that it would be in her best interest to just let it go. It is just the way things are.

The participants' choice of recollections on perceived racism revealed how they processed racism as one of their most memorable adversities. The experience of subtle racism was no less impactful than blatant racism. They all reflected on their experience and determined not to let it stop them from going forward. Ironically, when they reached out for advice from another African American, each were told there was nothing they could do to fight the structural and systemic power of the university.

Stereotype threats are socially premised psychological threats that arise when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). How the women handled the risk of stereotype threat varied as much as their personalities. When I interviewed Jay, I found her voice to be strong and assertive. Jay's professor may have reacted defensively when Jay spoke in her firm straightforward manner, and took her to be too aggressive – a

stereotype applied to assertive Black women. Stereotype threats were also experienced by two of the other participants even though they made a conscious effort to avoid them. For example, Jay learned how to navigate her way around conversations and debates in the university setting. In other words, she would be selective about whether she felt her opinion would be heard. If she felt her opinion would not be valued, she would not enter into a potential debate. It depended upon how important the topic was to her. In contrast, Tina chose avoidance of stereotype threat as much as possible: “This is just my own thing. I kind of watch how I say things. . . . When I’m around my own people I can just be myself.” She was admittedly shy and said, “[I] don’t really speak out unless I have to.” Pat, however, felt comfortable in the classroom setting so she was not “on guard” for stereotype threats. Pat considers herself a loner who tends not to talk much.

Pat’s classroom environment surrounded her with mostly older adults and, as a result she said, “I felt comfortable to speak during the classes.” She was fortunate to receive academic support and encouragement from faculty. There were two in particular she referred to as her cheerleaders: “When I felt like I couldn’t, I could call on her anytime. The other instructor was so motivational, he would make you feel like you could do anything, and after you leave the office you would say, ‘what I was thinking?’” Pat entered their offices filled with self-doubt but would leave feeling empowered and motivated.

### *Denial of Racism*

Racism was not automatically perceived to be a part of all the participants’ experiences. In some respects, racism was ever-present, so they focused on what and where they had some control. In contrast, Connie, Pat, and Lane denied the presence of

experienced racism but, when they discussed what was most memorable to them, the element of racism was present.

Connie said she didn't feel she was treated differently due to race but, in reality, she was concerned about the image of African American women and subconsciously concerned about the effect of stereotype threat – so much to the extent that, according to Connie, this was her most memorable experience as an undergraduate. She spoke of an unprepared African American female writing instructor:

I had a writing course. The instructor was really unprepared. . . (She was) an older African American woman where there were so few faculty of color represented. I was hopeful for her at first but she did not speak with confidence. Over time it showed that she stumbled through her work. Her assignments turned out to be busy work, and I felt embarrassed for her and did not want to put myself in that position of leadership, being so unprepared.

Connie realized she would never want to be seen that way, preferring to be seen as a confident and prepared professional. To Connie, the instructor not only made herself look bad, she made all African American women look bad. That is why she felt embarrassed for her, because she understood that the actions of one or a few Blacks were typically interpreted by a predominantly White society to be the actions of her race as a whole.

Similar to Connie, Lane did not acknowledge any form of racism or stereotype threat. Still, she wondered if one instructor may have had racist tendencies, although “she was encouraging and nice, but there was just something about her.” Overall, supportive counselors and instructors took her mind off any form of perceived racism: “I feel I was blessed with a lot of good teachers. Half of my classes were online and I couldn't really

say that I had any bad experiences. Other than the one female teacher, I never felt my race was a factor.” Lane also rationalized why she did not really notice racism among her instructors:

With the changes each semester, I do think I would have recognized any racism from my teachers. I don’t know why or how a teacher could be a racist. I guess we have them but, my God, they take some kind of stock in themselves right? A teacher should be willing to teach anybody and everybody who wants to learn.

The changes Lane refers to were the way commuting students briefly interact for such a short period of time on campus each semester, like passing through a revolving door; therefore, there was no time really to be aware of racism. Also, Lane did not feel the need to seek out African Americans: “I had some White female friends. It was not of main importance to me but it did feel good to have African American friends in class as well.” Lane may not have acknowledged racism but she did admit to having found comfort with the presence of other African American students in the classroom. Subconsciously, a sense of security was provided in not being the only African American in the classroom. It may have lessened the opportunity of a potential incident of racism or the pressure put on her to represent her whole race when she spoke.

Pat also said she did not observe any racism. She said her greatest challenge was as an adult learner. She observed others having problems academically and other issues but was not sure if it had to do with any form of discrimination: “I felt comfortable to speak during the classes. I did know someone who had problems academically. She had issues where she had to go to the top to get her work accepted and to graduate.” By choice Pat kept to herself and tended “not to talk as much because I am a loner.” In that



regard, Pat was avoiding any opportunity for a racist action. Connie and Pat's actions and reflections actually contradicted their denial of racism. Connie felt embarrassed for the unprepared African American teacher and did not want see any African American woman be identified in a negative light. Pat prioritized her concerns as an adult learner but could not ignore the perceived racism experienced by fellow classmates. In addition to racism as a major adversity, family responsibilities posed another challenge to overcome and forced some participants to make important choices.

### Family Challenges

The intersecting roles of mother, daughter, and wife affected the women in different ways. This could also be described as gendered family challenges because the women made choices based upon how they saw their roles and responsibilities as women. Of the six women, Pat and Alice had husbands supportive of their attending college. Without hesitation, their husbands helped with household chores and cared for their children. Jay, Lane, and Tina, however, were divorced prior to returning to college and decided to start a new chapter in their lives.

### *Role Models and Parenting*

As a parent, several of the women were keenly aware that their children observed their challenges as adult learners, as African American women, and the responsibilities therein. This fueled their desire to be positive role models for them. They did not want their young ones to take the opportunity of obtaining a college degree for granted or devalue the efforts necessary to be a successful student, like staying focused and completing their studies.

Participants would have their sons and daughters sit down and do their homework while they studied their lessons in order to model behavior and also to demonstrate what not to do. For example, Jay had two sons whose education was of foremost importance to her. She homeschooled the youngest and studied when both sons studied. She noticed, “Now that the oldest is a college student, he recognizes the truth of many things I told him over the years – things that were not just something that happened back in my day.” Jay was proud of this acknowledgement. She set a great example for him to model what it meant to be a good student and a disciplined person.

Pat, for instance, shared how overwhelming her college experience was with her daughters: “[I] tried to give them the message that they do not want to go through what Mom’s going through. I hope to lead the way to let them know they are going to college, at least try it.” Pat wanted to spare her daughters the struggle from having to wait so long before going to college as older adults. She would like them to attend before the complications and demands on older adults make it more difficult to graduate.

Alice taught her son the discipline required to be an effective student by being a strong positive example. She recalled:

He was required to do homework at the table, just like Mom. It was good for him to see first-hand the importance of a college education, the workload it entailed, and the teachable moments it offered. To see what I could achieve as a working mother caused him to stop complaining and was able to raise his grade average to an A in middle school.

Witnessing first hand and participating in the discipline of study his mom demonstrated, modelled the behavior for Alice's son and delivered positive outcomes with his improved grades.

Parenting was not always the focus, though. For Lane, parenting was secondary to getting her degree. After all, her son and daughter were now young adults. Lane left the university the first time because of the death of her daughter, followed by a divorce. Lane decided it was time to put herself first. She explained:

I was so focused on myself. It was a fun time at the beginning because we were all studying. My son was already two years ahead of me. I failed to see that my daughter was having trouble her first year in college. But she could have also taken the initiative to speak up when she needed help. Turns out neither of them have finished college yet.

There was still some inkling of regret in her voice, perhaps some guilt for not devoting more time to her children, when she said: "Had I not been in college, I would have focused more attention on their college experience." Although she waited until her children were older and better able to care for themselves, she must have wondered if her children would have graduated college like she did if given more attention and guidance.

### ***Sacrifices***

Sacrifice took on different forms for the participants. For some it meant relinquishing past responsibilities or relationships. For others it meant personal sacrifice. For example, Tina sacrificed her health and her education to take care of her sick father, worked two jobs while attending college full-time, and found brief periods of study time whenever possible. Tina first transferred from the local community college to PWI-SE to

major in education. At that time she was still married, but things began to change shortly afterwards. She explained:

I had taken all the classes I needed to take for the education degree. I was still married when I first started at PWI-SE. I enrolled and was accepted. My husband and I then divorced. I had to drop out to support myself, stayed out five years.

I was concentrating on my own studies. Had I not been in college, I would have paid more attention to their [my children's] college experience. . . I chose not to be involved in a personal relationship while in school because I didn't want to compromise my study time. I'm really glad I made that decision.

A divorce caused Tina to drop out of college. It took its toll on her financially and emotionally to the point where, when her children were older, and she was financially stable, she saw this time as her opportunity to fulfill her personal goal and to ensure there would not be any obstacle in her way the second time around. Nevertheless, another obstacle did emerge and Tina had made another choice, but not a difficult one, to care for her sick father. Tina had a fierce loyalty and devotion to her father. Torn three ways among work, school and home responsibilities, Tina was not eating properly and started to show signs of self-neglect. Her father took notice and would ask if she was alright and she would reply: "I am okay, really Daddy." To this day the emotion welled up in her voice when she recalled that turbulent time "I don't know how I did it. It must have been God." Although she was almost at her breaking point, there was no doubt she would do it again if she had to. It was not easy to return as an adult learner. The next section addresses some of those challenges the participants faced as re-entry students.

### Adult Learner Challenges

As adult learners have unique concerns upon making the decision to enter college. Participants expressed areas of concern as adult learners more than being African American women because they felt that they had no control over societal perceptions of themselves in the collegiate environment – no more so than in the workplace or any other institution. What follows identified their concerns as adult learners.

#### *Adjusting*

Three of the participants demonstrated that there was an adjustment period that needed to take place as the transition was made from working full-time with no required study time to having to add into an already tight schedule pursuit of a college degree and all it entails. Also evident was an emotional element of anxiousness and fear where adults previously removed from the college environment had to quickly adapt to the required current learning technologies and tools in order to complete their course assignments.

Jay's experience was one of less support. She felt, "It is now up to adult students to assist and guide one another." Jay felt that there is a need for more adult learners to mentor among their peers and share their experiences and knowledge to supplement what services universities provide. Especially to those entering or reentry adult learners who may not find it convenient to navigate their way around campus, identifying resources or knowing what questions to ask is critical. Universities such as PWI-SE provide transfer, adult commuter, and veteran services with instructors providing office hours to meet with students; however, instructors often unintentionally excluded full-time working students. This would explain why the participants had different recollections and both positive and negative opinions about the student services PWI-SE provided. For example, Pat's

classroom experience was positive because it consisted primarily of fellow adult commuter students; therefore she “felt comfortable to speak during classes.”

Another major adjustment for adult learners was learning the new learning tools and technologies. The oldest participant, Lane, was the only one who mentioned concern of learning technology. She recalled “It was more about age – how technology had changed and the challenge of the workload. I didn’t know what PowerPoint was until I went back to college.” Lane is a reminder that adult learners who began or returned to complete their college education must quickly grasp use of the learning technology tools necessary to maintain their current employment or place them in position for career advancement. Pat was aware of her weakness as an adult learner in terms keeping up with the course assignments. She confessed: “[There was] no strategy. I was probably more a procrastinator.”

### *Time Management*

The participants shared many responsibilities that demanded much of their time. Juggling time among their jobs, studies, and home responsibilities posed a tremendous challenge for Tina and her family. Connie reflected on how this affected her: “The negative part was getting through the experience – the difficulty of trying to complete my work for school. It was stressful.” Lane also thought about the choices she made to devote more time to her studies:

I was only a class or two from graduating and really wasn’t going to give up. I tried to devote more study time. I would take more time off from my job. I did pass the (math) class – not with the grade I wanted, but I did pass the class.

Often participants' determination was key in helping them respond to challenges.

Overall, participants had to adjust to several issues involved in becoming a college student. This included getting acclimated with the college environment and the resources offered and, if they had been out over 10 years, odds were they had to learn or reacquaint themselves with the latest learning technologies like Powerpoint, iClicker, and other applications. The participants faced additional adversities including workplace and institutional challenges.

### *Workplace Challenges*

All the women in the study expressed a struggle working full-time jobs and finding time for their studies. They would use their lunch breaks to see faculty during office hours, study on the weekends, and/or schedule days off from work to complete assignments if possible. Most of their employers did not allow any flexibility. For example, Tina worked two full-time jobs while caring for her sick father. She needed the jobs to make ends meet but her employers were not sensitive to her plight. When she came to work, her mind was on scheduling her studies and assignments. When she was in class, she was thinking about how she could manage study time around work. As a result, she recalled: "My co-workers thought I was crazy." In the case of Lane, who worked in veteran's affairs, she hoped she would "reap the benefits of her degree" and put herself in position for a promotion. Instead, she was positioned to train less-experienced personnel to become her supervisors and managers. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence of workplace discrimination familiar to many African Americans. This is one of several reasons why Lane would say "My job was my worst deterrent. Trying to match up my school schedule with my work schedule was a real challenge sometimes." Lane's job did

not accommodate her need to study and meet assignment deadlines so she had to steal time whenever possible. Vacation time was sacrificed to keep up with course assignments.

All the participants admitted that the workplace added to the stress of being a working college student. Lane and Tina's experiences, in particular, demonstrated how work got in the way of coursework demands. Politics of the workplace did not guarantee career advancement and only condoned the notion that meritocracy was a myth. A final adversity was derived from the narratives that involved institutional challenges.

### *Institutional Challenges*

According to some of the participants, some faculty members had lowered academic expectations of them and graded them at that level. A common example of this was a conflict over grades where participants felt they did not get the grades they deserved and faculty negatively responded to being challenged. At PWI-SE, some faculty did not want to be challenged about the grades they assigned to their students' work. As previously mentioned with Alice, she was graded according to how her professor saw her as a Black female instead of her academic performance. It could be argued that it was the 1980's when this occurred, but in 2014 Tina faced a similar challenge when she felt she did not get the grade she deserved. She recalled "I did everything I could to earn that A. I felt I deserved an A." In both cases with Alice and Tina, a power structure is acknowledged, but at the same time, it is accepted as part of the institutional makeup.

Tina expressed fear of misunderstanding in the university setting when she pointed out how she carefully watched what she said and how she communicated to her White peers: "This is just my own thing. I kind of watch how I say things [with White



people], talking more correct so to sound more intelligent, and when I'm around my own people I can just be myself." Tina felt she had to cover up who she is to be accepted by the dominant campus culture by removing all sounds and expressions attributed to her ethnicity and her culture so to appear intelligent and acceptable when she was among White people on campus. To overcome this adversity and others, the participants had to strategize how best to go about coping and adapting to each adverse event. How they accomplished this feat involved an observation of their sources of resilience, thereby answering research question three.

#### Sources of Resilience – Response to Adversities

Participants endured multiple adversities, from family to institutional challenges. They coped with their adversities through the help of family support, religious faith, inner strength and other less-mentioned sources that impacted their resilience. Answering the third research question of how do adult African American women respond to adversities throughout their undergraduate experiences, a breakdown of how the participants utilized specific coping strategies follows.

#### Family Support

Family support came in forms of supportive husbands and shared wisdom of older generations. Of all the participants, Alice had the most to say about the importance of family. Alice and Pat had husbands who were willing to take an active role in childcare and household chores. For example, Alice's husband "is my lifelong friend. He has always been supportive in whatever I wanted to do, whether it meant going back to school or changing jobs. He'd say 'We will just adjust.' He's also thinking about going back to school." Alice inadvertently inspired her husband to get his degree. Same as

Alice, Pat also felt fortunate to have a husband willing to help with family responsibilities while she attended college. She summed this up by saying, “I have a great husband. He helped out a lot, very supportive.” Other forms of family support came from parents and grandparents. Pat also acknowledged what support the rest of her family offered: “Family encouraged me and helped me out.” Family was also a key to the success of Alice’s college experience.

Family can also serve as mentors. Alice came from a family consisting of strong African American women: her mother, both grandmothers, and a great aunt who was the first African American and the first woman senator in her state. When times were tough and she was anxious to complete her degree program, it was her maternal grandmother who told her to stop looking so far down the road and taking giant steps. Grandma said, “Take baby steps. Baby steps will get you where you want to go. Baby steps also give you the chance to see what you may miss if you are just stepping over them with giant steps.” Emotional support was accompanied with wisdom – wisdom gained from survival of much oppression that far exceeded participants’ experience.

Alice also received positive reinforcement and affirmation from the men in her life. When Alice was featured in a popular local women’s magazine for her professional work, she showed her grandfather, saying “Look Granddaddy, I’m famous.” He replied, “You were famous when you were born.” As her grandfather pointed out, and Alice would come to realize, “we are always looking for success, but that keeps us from seeing the success we have already achieved, until someone with more wisdom than us points it out. Success comes in many flavors and we are all giant sundaes.” In other words, we can be a success in and of ourselves. In our own unique way, we all have great potential from

the day we are born. For that reason, we are already a success. It does not define us. Success is a good thing that comes in many forms. We do not always recognize them when they are right before our eyes. Going forward, Alice was inspired to apply this notion of true success to her personal and professional life.

Sources of family support were also indirect. Jay found motivation in the fact that her sons observed her efforts to be a good college student. The feedback she received from them was very positive and also contributed a sense of humor. One of her sons would tell her: “You keep on getting all this education; they’ll come and take your degrees back!” Connie gave a brief mention of credit to her family as an accompaniment to her friends, but Lane and Tina did not attribute family support to impacting their resilience. The participants credited spirituality as more of a source of resilience.

#### Spirituality and Religious Faith

Most of the participants mentioned some form of spirituality in their lives and as a significant source of strength to their adjustment to college. It was acknowledged as more meaningful for some than others but ever-present. Pat mentioned attending church functions as an outlet when she needed some “down time” from the stress of studies. It re-energized her spirit and inspired her to remain persistent. Tina said that she could not explain how she came this far without some divine intervention: “I’m not an overly religious person. I believe in God. He is the one who gives me strength. Some things happened and I don’t know how I got through it. [I] realize there has to be a higher power.” In other words, Tina exhibited a spiritual development at some point in her life, most likely influenced by family. She did not actively practice or participate in services or ceremony but at some level maintained her faith.

Other women were explicit about their faith. Lane found comfort in reading the Bible. Connie felt strongly about her faith, gaining reinforcement of her faith through family and friends. She emphasized: “I am a very religious person. I feel prayer is very important. . . My closest friend, we shared our struggles continuously and always told me that what will happen is God’s will and we just have to accept it and move on.” Her friends also served as a social support network that helped reaffirm her faith. In addition to spiritual reinforcement, others looked within themselves for strength.

#### Inner Strength as Motivational Inspiration

Working things out for themselves was important for several of the women when they had difficulty with their studies or needed motivation to continue. The participants sought different avenues to make this happen. All the participants must have possessed some form of inner strength to remain resilient, but Jay attributed a major source of her resilience to motivational readings and videos. Her reasoning behind this is because “they are an important source of inspiration and affirmation because we don’t hear it enough.” This instilled a sense of empowerment in her. Inner strength also came from experiential knowledge. Previous experiences at the university taught her how to “choose my battles carefully, sifting through what is worth speaking up about during class discussions or to just quietly take notes while knowing the information is not correct or irrelevant to my personal experience.” Jay strategized, using her past experiences to inform how she could best survive on campus.

Of all the participants, Tina appeared to be the most tested with adversities but found a variety of ways to cope. Not to lessen the challenges of the others, several of her coping strategies involved some form of inner strength. Tina tried hard to figure out what

she did not understand first before seeking out help. She also weighed how important it was for her to get the answer: “I get frustrated but I try to figure out if it’s something I really want to understand. If it’s not a big deal, I’ll just forget it. I find myself stressing over my homework, I’ll call a classmate or do whatever I have to do to figure it out.”

Additionally, Tina demonstrated how fiercely driven she was because she was pulled three different directions: work, school, and family responsibilities. Physically close to the breaking point, she reached within herself to do what she felt obligated to do by rationalizing and prioritizing her responsibilities. Finally, all the participants exuded inner strength because they possessed the ability to adapt to their experienced adversities, determined how best to react to them, and learned from the experience.

#### Other Means of Support

Additional means of coping were realized by the participants. Racial socialization and faculty support were important coping strategies. Racial socialization is the process of preparing a marginalized group to develop positive self-concepts in a hostile environment (Neblett et al., 2008) by acting as a buffer to the negative impact of racial discrimination and contributing to the development and reinforcement of racial and ethnic pride. A contributor of racial socialization was Lane and Connie’s participation in informal sister circles. Drawing from intersectionality, the women linked race and gender issues and identities together because their experiences usually did not distinguish between the two. Lane recalled: this was a ladies group where we often went out to dinner or at each other’s house.” This was a nurturing approach where the women shared their life experiences and gave and received support. For Connie, it was her sister circle that encouraged her to return to college:

It was kind of a collective of individuals. I had one close friend in particular who encouraged me to get my degree. We don't speak too often. But my closest friend, we shared our struggles continuously and always told me that what will happen is God's will and we just have to accept it and move on.

Lane and Connie's networks of friends provided emotional and moral support, ...

Some participants also discussed academic support from peers and faculty. Jay spoke of the impact of those ahead of her in her program who reached back to help her and others: "I went through sort of a mini orientation. I was told what to expect from certain classes and a sharing of textbooks that would be returned for other students to use." Pat and Lane also gave much credit for their resilience to faculty support. Pat had one instructor who helped her write papers: "She was a good cheerleader without knowing she was a cheerleader. I could call on her anytime." Lane said that "I had two fantastic teachers. If it weren't for them, I may not have finished college. They were always encouraging." In several cases, their instructors were also their counselors or advisors. They remained patient, kind, and supportive. Those instructors that made such a positive impression on the participants appeared to possess empathy to the participants' challenges as adult learners and made them feel like they mattered.

### Summary

Six women were re-entry students who returned to the university after several years in the workplace. Reasons for dropping out the first time ranged from financial concerns to marriage and starting a family. As adult learners, they would appear briefly on campus for advising, faculty visits, and limited classroom time. They had to juggle their time among their studies, work, and home responsibilities. For all the women, this

led to making strategic decisions that enabled them to complete their degrees. Most took online courses for the convenience they afforded.

Crafting the women's narratives revealed themes of adversities and themes related to resilience sources. Their narratives revealed that their perceptions and acknowledgements that these challenges existed and to what extent were critical to understanding their experiences. There was no assimilation to the institutional culture because, as commuter students, their campus visits were brief and their selected identity was consciously selected to match the situation an environment as they saw fit. All the women revealed experiencing some form of either perceived racism or stereotype threat although not all consciously acknowledged it. This was perceived more so by the older women. The youngest, Connie, did not recognize racism directly but implied it through her reflections of what made the most impact on her experience as an adult Black woman in college. This could be considered a form of avoidance of stereotype threat.

Participants experienced workplace, institutional, and family challenges, which overlapped with adult learner challenges. In addition, religion and family support were important as sources of resilience for most of the women. The next chapter will discuss how the key constructs brought out by the data, as covered in this chapter, relate to the literature. It will also address its implications to the student services provided toward adult African American women by PWIs and provide recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Overview of the Study

Predominantly White urban research universities have traditionally customized their missions based on a youth-oriented culture and targeting the youthful population of undergraduates. These institutions are now challenged to address the needs of the growing diverse adult population which includes an influx of adult African American women from the community in which that university serves (Kasworm, 2010; NCES, 2002). This population has surpassed the development of American higher education's initiatives to address their needs (Closson, 2010; Coker, 2003; Kasworm, 2002; Noel-Levitz, 2012). Social stratifications of race, gender and class, or in other words, intersectionality, continue to label Black women in degrading categories, based upon the racial ideological assumptions that still permeate throughout American society and higher education (Alic, 2009; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Henry, Butler, & West, 2011; Henry, West & Jackson, 2010; Zamani 2002). Bearing these facts in mind, the purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the experiences of resilient adult African American woman undergraduate attending an urban research predominantly White university.

Previous research concentrated on a deficit perspective of adult learners and of African Americans but none specifically on the resilience of adult African American



women undergraduates attending urban research PWIs (Brown & Tylka, 2011; O'Connor, 2002). Also lacking in the literature was the use of a critical race and critical race feminist theoretical framework to examine how they made sense of their experiences as African American women. Addressing this gap required the use of narratives that would give voice to the study participants and simultaneously countered established societal and higher education assumptions of adult African American women undergraduates. To do this, six women who identified as adult African American women, consented to participate. Additionally, to assist in this endeavor, the following research questions were raised: 1) how do adult African American women describe their experiences at an urban PWI?, 2) what adversities do adult African American women confront at an Urban PWI?, and 3) how do adult African American women respond to adversities throughout their undergraduate experience?

The most appropriate methodological framework to address the research questions was critical race theory, accompanied by critical race feminism. Critical race theory challenges the myths and assumptions American society has applied on persons of color such as people of color being intellectually inferior, belief in the myth of meritocracy, and the presence of a colorblind ideology (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Critical race feminism gave validity to the experiential knowledge of African American women and recognizes how they navigated through societal interactions. CRF also took into account the intersectionality of race, gender and class for Black women. In other words, the participants adapted an appropriate identity that best applied to the social context at that moment (hooks, 1984). Narratives were used to bring to life the lived experiences of the participants. They are, in effect, counternarratives because they

displayed the resiliency of the participants rather than the deficit focus of their experience.

This study identified some of the challenges adult African American women undergraduates face, as previously mentioned in the literature, regarding adversities and coping responses to those adversities. Also evident was the presence of one or more constructs that make up this study's conceptual framework regarding the resilience of adult African American women at PWIs. As a reminder, they are: an adverse event, support systems, coping strategies, and resilient characteristics. These constructs are woven into the discussion of the findings.

### Key Findings

The findings in this study addressed the experienced adversities of the participants and coping strategies that impacted their resilience. The participants were all re-entry students who returned to the university for various reasons. Adverse events, like divorce, were the case for half of the participants. The literature mentioned similar reasons for returning to college, as it relates to adult learners. In addition to the aftermath of divorce, other reasons the literature gives that the participants expressed were a forced or voluntary change in career path to compete in the job market, and improved quality of life for themselves and their families (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Kasworm, 2010, 2010a; Stoel, 1980; McKinnon-Slaney, 1994; Kasworm, 2005; Rice, 2003; Kazis, et al., 2007). For these women, decisions to return to college were not all the result of an adverse event. For several there was an unfulfilled goal that had to be met; but the timing had to be right. Their children needed to be older or young adults. Sacrifices included reduced attention to children, less free time for self and others, avoidance of personal

relationships, and, in one extreme case, a neglect of personal health. The major challenges the participants faced could not be ranked in terms of whether one challenge was more impactful than another.

### Experienced Adversities

The experience of returning to college at PWI-SE proved to be an emotional and stressful time for all the participants. Their adversities included major life events that ranged from the death of a child, loss of income, and divorce. In the background of their adversities was the constant presence of perceived racism and intersectionality. Racism is the beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of observable characteristics or ethnic group affiliation (Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006). Intersectionality, in context of a critical framework, refers to the interactions of racial, gendered, and class (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; University of California Center for New Racial Studies, 2011). Other constructs of experienced adversities included family challenges, adult learner challenges, workplace challenges and institutional challenges. The most prevalent adversities mentioned by the women corresponded with the literature. They were perceived racism, family challenges and adult learner challenges. Most of the literature related to adult African American women highlighted racism (Henry, Butler, & West, 2011; Henry, West & Jackson, 2010; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; O'Connor, 2002; Sanchez, 1997; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007) in an attempt to set the stage for the foundation of understanding the existence of perceived racism in American society and its institutions. Family challenges were least covered (Rice, 2003; Rosales & Person, 2003). Kasworm (2010, 2002) was the foremost

researcher on adult learner issues, followed by Rice (2003) regarding adult learner services.

### Perceived Racism and Stereotype Threat

The experiences of the participants regarding racism closely reflects the existing literature that race-related stressors have a huge bearing on adult African American women's academic success (Asburn-Nardo & Smith, 2008; Neville, Heppner, Ji, & Thye, 2004; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000) and serves as a constant reminder of her "Blackness" (Parker & Flowers, 2003; Guiffrida, 2006). Reactions to perceived racism proved to be very complex. Sources of racism at PWI-SE were found to appear in more subtle forms of microaggressions instead of overt incidents. As explained in the literature, microaggressions are conscious, unconscious, verbal, nonverbal, and visual forms of insults that are directed toward people of color (Sue, 2010). The data derived from this sample of adult African American women revealed that, in some respects, racism was an ever-present expectation (not necessarily an accepted expectation), so they focused on what and where they had some control. The data also indicated a mixed response to the perception of racism. As Sue et al. (2007) and Sue (2010) pointed out, and was evident in this study, acknowledgement of race and gender discrimination was dependent upon the perceptions and perspectives of the participants. Lack of specifying gender discrimination by the participants affirmed the intersectionality of their experiences. In other words, the women did not separate their identities as women from their identities as African Americans (Cole, 2009; Davis, 2008).

The younger generation of adult women in this study perceived little or no racial microaggressions (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2007). This may be a generational issue of personal history where racial microaggressions were more prevalent and likely experienced decades ago. This corroborates with O'Connor's (2002) qualitative study at a mid-Western university, where it shares a similar finding. Additionally, minimal perceptions of racism and sexism may be a result of a growing accountability for inclusiveness and diversity among educational institutions, and as one of the women pointed out, the reason may be because, as adults, they are too mobile and only have limited time on campus to really experience it. With that said, there remained an overwhelming overcast of concern of confidentiality and fear of retaliation by the university's faculty and administration for speaking out.

Subtle forms of microaggressions were attacks on the participants' identities and devaluing their culture. As a result, the primary finding that stood out significantly as a result of racism was the responses to stereotype threats. None of the participants' narratives coincided with the master narrative assumption discussed in Chapter 2 that the academic success of people of color was attributed to assimilation to the dominant culture (Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007). It could be that assimilation is not a primary focus of adult African American women - especially not for adult learners.

Perceived racism can be a deterrent or a motivator. A few of the participants internalized their responses but the outcomes were expressed in different ways – most likely the ones who denied the presence of racism. In terms of racism this means their

personal conscious or subconscious acceptance of the dominant society's racist views, stereotypes and biases of one's ethnic group. It gives rise to patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that result in discriminating, minimizing, criticizing, finding fault, invalidating, and hating oneself while simultaneously valuing the dominant culture (Lipsky, 1979).

Depending upon their personality, or maybe past experience, some of the participants would fearlessly take them on, not anticipating retaliation or worrying about retaliation or, on the other hand, others would avoid them as much as possible, keenly aware of the possibility of retaliation or feel it will come to nothing. Others participants expressed experiencing what the literature defined as racial battle fatigue – psychophysiological symptoms of becoming physically, mentally and emotionally drained from dealing with a multitude of microaggressions (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006). Another form of avoidance came in the form of hiding one's culture in conversation and behavior within the classroom setting, in hopes of being accepted socially and intellectually. This avoidance ties in with what Lipsitz (1998), Johnson-Bailey (1994, 1998, 2001), Donovan (2011) addressed as an attempt to bypass a potential stereotype threat. Additionally, a subconscious effect of stereotype threat was a deep concern for the image of African American women. Ironically, this was also evident among those participants who denied experienced racism. Because of the dominant group's negative assumptions of Black women's behaviors and abilities, and in many instances, negative representation of one Black woman is viewed as representative of all Black women, other Black women inadvertently feel embarrassed for them. Zamani (2002) and Carnevale and Strohl (2013) remind us that situations like this tend to cause a

re-evaluation of one's own talents and abilities, and ultimately take away something from the experience – either a positive or negative effect. In addition to experiencing race-related stressors like racism and stereotype threat, other challenges for adult African American women are multilayered because most are mothers and wives with family concerns and responsibilities.

### Family Challenges

Just as Kasworm (2010) alluded to the pros and cons weighed by adults when deciding to return to college, and the potential sacrifice and rewards from the outcomes, the participants also made choices based upon how they saw their roles and responsibilities as women. They possessed a fierce devotion to family. For example, those who were mothers due to divorce waited until their children were old enough to care for themselves before returning to college. They also had to decide how much attention to allot to their children as well as to their studies, especially since time was already limited due to employment responsibilities. Clearly recognizing the value of a college education, as parents, the participants wanted to convey by example to their children, not only its importance, but also the discipline and focus it takes to reach one's goals. Although some participants projected a positive role model as college students, it did not guarantee that their children or other family members would follow their example; but, in retrospect, they still felt it was worth a try. This effort also seemed to state that in an American society of continuous inequities where race still has a bearing on their life chances, and where access to opportunities remains shaped by one's circumstances, it was still worth a try. Another finding revealed that the participants serving as role models to their children also had a mutual positive effect for the

participant. The participants were motivated to succeed when they witnessed positive academic outcomes from their children.

The literature portrays the Black woman as the matriarch of the family who sacrifices for her family, emphasizing that 50% of most of Black households are headed by women (Coker, 2003). This study found that several participants shifted their focus from parenting to being a good student and putting their needs first. This did not delete the “what if” feelings of guilt – that if one devoted more time to their children (however older) they would have had a better outcome. As caregivers, the participants’ devotion extended to eldercare. But even if it was a sick child, the response still may have been the same level of caring. When it comes to ill family members, priorities shift to address their needs first and foremost – sometimes at the cost of one’s physical and mental health. Also at risk was reduced productivity at work and lower grades. Ultimately, the study showed that family challenges pose a strong sense of responsibility for the participants as role models and caregivers, therefore worth making the sacrifices. Apparently other sacrifices regarding relationships took place.

Half of the participants experienced divorce early in their college experience. None of them really wanted to talk about this phase of their lives, only to point out that it had something to do with their initial dropout from college. Of course, this is speculation but research has shown African American women college students’ educational enlightenment potentially poses a strain on their marital relationships (Kim, 2012; Banks, 2012). Going to college is already a stressor in itself. If the marriage has a weak foundation, envy and insecurity could emerge within her spouse, as well as a distancing in communication, diminished shared experiences and a growing apart. In some cases,



the African American male feels threatened by her college education. Her studies cause less time for him and there may also be a conflict over what is considered as gendered roles of responsibilities. In other words, he may feel she should be home with the children or doing more household chores. Additionally, because there are more African American women attending college than African American men, and she is less likely to marry outside her race, college educated Black women, more than any other group, stands to marry a man who is less educated than she is and makes less money than she does (Banks, 2012). Other transitional relationships the participants faced involved returning to an evolved college environment with advanced technologies, among other confronted challenges.

#### Adult Learner Challenges

Findings agreed with the literature regarding adult learner's concerns such as the need for counseling services, unfamiliarity with new learning technologies, time management and stress management (Rice, 2003; Rosales & Person, 2003). Additionally, there is a culture shock and transition period of adjustment for adult learners (Evans, et al., 2010; Schlossberg, 1989; 1984). Another similarity to the literature on adult learner challenges is the difficulty some of the women had with adjusting to re-entry or transferring to a four-year PWI university (Kasworm, 2010). Another transition is made from working full-time with no required study time to having to add into an already tight schedule, pursuit of a college degree and all it entails. Although PWI-SE offered transfer, adult commuter services and veteran services; adult learners could only take advantage of these services if their workplace and personal schedules allowed. Therefore, the participants shared both positive and negative recollections and opinions about the

student services PWI-SE provided. Grasping use of new learning tools and technologies such as Blackboard, PowerPoint, and other software, posed an additional stressful challenge for the participants. Only one of the participants openly expressed this concern. Having already been or were currently in the workforce, all the participants were well aware of the importance of grasping the technology in order to remain competitive for career advancement or maintaining their current employment. Remaining competitive was only one dimension of concern within the workplace for the participants.

### Workplace Challenges

The participants' workplace was also a major source of stress. Dividing time between full-time jobs, studies and family and friends prompted several participants to claim that their jobs were their worst deterrent. Available leave time from work was exhausted as available or permitted. Lunch breaks were used to catch faculty office hours. All employers did not allow flexibility and workplace discrimination was prevalent in terms of restricted access to promotional opportunities. The participants' workplace experiences also supported the position that negative beliefs, attitudes and feelings toward African Americans maintain the presence of interpersonal prejudice (Hall, Everett, & Hamilton-Mason, 2012). The participants' experiences also concurred with the stressor themes that included being hired or promoted in the work place, defending one's race and lack of mentorship, and isolation or exclusion. For example, one of the participants found out that education and professional development did not guarantee career progression. Most mentioned the workplace as a deterrent not only to attending college, but another reminder of inequality of opportunity and earnings as women and as African Americans. Overlapping as a form of institutional discrimination,

workplace challenges are only one form of institutional challenges African American women experience.

### Institutional Challenges

Institutional discrimination involves organizational policies and procedures that unfairly restrict the opportunities of African Americans and other marginalized groups (cite supporting literature). In terms of universities, this also involved faculty's lowered academic expectations of African American women as students. Additionally, at PWI-SE, some faculty did not want to be challenged about the grades they assigned to their students' work: therefore, a power structure was acknowledged, but at the same time, accepted as part of its institutional makeup. Feeling the need to compromise or diminish one's cultural identity in hopes of acceptance by the dominant group's campus environment is another byproduct of coping with institutional racism. Devaluing experiential knowledge and cultural insensitivity was evident in the classroom was not always intentional; but nevertheless produced racist outcomes.

Permeating society and possibly continuing to affect the participants' lives on a daily basis have been a lack of economic opportunities, disproportionate distribution of resources to communities and schools, and credit laws that favor those who least need it and exploit others. Many institutions have minimized the presence of racism because it has been equated with individual incidents of overt hatred and violence toward racial minorities and institutions display more diverse populations; therefore subtle forms of racism tend to be overlooked or dismissed. The literature reminds us that this remains evident regardless of Black people's migration to middle-class status (Cabrera, 2011; Sharp and Hall, 2014; Williams, Nesiba, and McConnell, 2005). The participants found

ways to adapt to, if not overcome, the previously-discussed challenges. Their responses to these adversities are examined.

#### SOURCES OF RESILIENCE – RESPONSE TO THEIR ADVERSITIES

The participants coped with their adversities utilizing several strategies. The ones mentioned that most impacted their resilience were family support, spirituality, and inner strength.

##### Family Support

Generations of family support were a valuable source of mentorship, emotional support, and racial socialization for the participants. Mentorship is essential to the guidance of less experienced persons and reduction of trial and error with life's choices. Family that mentor can be immediate or extended family members. Psychologists remind us that we are social and emotional beings that crave positive reinforcement. Similar to the literature's claims, racial socialization afforded them a means of putting situations into proper perspective, offered positive reinforcement and instilled a sense of pride (Bynum et al., 2007; Neblett et al., 2006; Herndon and Hirt, 2004). Two of the women had supportive husbands that also contributed love and affirmation. Marital relationships do not have to become estranged because one of the spouses is learning and growing intellectually. In fact, as this study showed, the experience can prove to be inspirational.

##### Spirituality and Religious Faith

The findings did not necessarily prove, but did not dispute Dancy's (2010) claim that African Americans filter many important life decisions such as college attendance and career choices through their spirituality and spiritual identity. All the participants mentioned some form of spirituality in their lives and as a significant source of strength

to their adjustment to college. It was more meaningful for some than others but all maintained a belief in God or acknowledged the presence of a higher power. It is interesting how shared spiritual messages bonded those involved, created a social connection and formed a protective shield against uncertainty and fear. In addition to spiritual reinforcement, others looked within themselves for strength.

### Inner Strength

To various degrees, all the participants exhibited inner strength. For some this meant working things out for themselves and knowing when to reach out to others and seek resources as a last resort. They exhibited a high form of self-efficacy, one of the main components of resilient people. Feeding oneself with sources of inspiration and reaffirmation was also recommended. In their own ways, several of the women displayed a fierce determination and a passionate sense of devotion to family regardless of what was sacrificed. It was also a form of self-love to trust themselves enough to reach their highest potential.

### Other Means of Support

The literature recognized the critical support of faculty (Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood, 2000). It bears noting here because several of the participants enthusiastically expressed their appreciation for their patience, time, and support. They exhorted their impact on their resilience as college students. In several cases, their instructors were also their counselors or advisors. This places faculty in a significant role of influence and long-term impact. It can be a positive one or a negative one. Effective faculty appears to be aware and sensitive to this relationship. How this relationship is approached may be acclimated to the academic program, such as STEM programs, in which African

American students will not feel the need to be “on point” to avoid being judged as less worthy or less intelligent (McGee & Martin, 2011).

### IMPLICATIONS TO PWIS

Based upon the findings in this study, creating an university environment conducive to resilience will involve the formulation of strong support systems of peers and role models, adoption of a culturally sensitive curriculum, and an increase in awareness of collegiate institution traditions’ effect on adult African American women within that environment.

#### Support Systems

Formal and informal support systems for adult African American women at PWIs have recently emerged on a small scale and extremely necessary due to underrepresentation of Black women as faculty and administrators. For example, support groups like the Sistah Network at the University of Denver provide mentorship and role models to female African American graduate students. The group meets two or three times each quarter to openly discuss academic challenges and members’ personal and professional accomplishments and goals. The network also includes Black professional women from the Denver area who can act as role models and mentors. Several impactful services this group provides are problem-solving issues involving faculty, administration and navigating the university environment and institutional system, challenging the mindset of stereotype threat. The literature refers to sister circles that could be applicable to counseling adult African American women by teaching race-based survival strategies, embracing cultural diversity, sharing mutual spirituality, respect and communication.

### Culturally Sensitive Curriculum

Utilizing the experiential knowledge of Black women offers a sense of empowerment and adds more relevance to the curriculum. Sealey-Ruiz (2007) noted that such curriculum encourages more active participation and fosters positive self and group identity. Universities have begun to recognize the value of culturally relevant curriculums and even award faculty that make strides toward that goal. Faculty workshops can serve several beneficial purposes. First of all, an engaged pedagogy involving a culturally sensitive curriculum (hooks, 1994) could allow for emerging students' life experiences into the classroom as part of that knowledge. It could also break down barriers of power between faculty and student by having faculty reveal something about themselves of their postsecondary experience in context of the curriculum. Doing so offers a mutual vulnerability (Berry, 2010). Faculty workshops that advise them on creating less of a power play between themselves and students is one step to obtaining a less stressful learning environment. Such workshops could also increase awareness of the institutional traditions' effect on adult African American women when in that environment. Ultimately, a culturally sensitive curriculum can promote critical race theory by allowing relevance to the students' personal experiences, directly connecting the real world environment and real life situations.

A culturally relevant approach to teaching is likely to be met with resistance. After all, some faculty will be reluctant due to discomfort with addressing issues of racism in their courses (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Change is not easy because it will involve transforming the mindset of a predominantly White university environment engrained in past assumptions and attitudes about race. A culturally relevant curriculum has the

potential to alter a Black inferiority mindset (Aird, 2008) and replace it with empowered students. Practical application of this involves what Ladson-Billings (1994) calls fostering the desire for academic excellence, utilizing student's culture as a vehicle for learning, develop a critical consciousness, challenging cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequalities. An example of developing academic success begins with the first point of contact in admissions where counselors and faculty advisors provide means of obtaining small but obtainable goals to build student's self-efficacy and locus of control. Incorporating cultural awareness of adult students can enable faculty to reach them at their phase in life. One application has involved students sharing their personal experiences as part of the course to create relevance, reciprocity of knowledge, and sense of empowerment. PWIs have begun to embrace cultural relevance in some of their curriculum.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several directions of anti-deficit qualitative inquiry can be taken from this study. Exploration of adult African American women's resilience in other contexts, such as addressing them as online students, is an untapped issue. Focusing on the resilience of adult male African American graduate students is another avenue for much needed research. Finally, another inquiry could involve what culturally sensitive approaches have been taken to improve the adult learner programs and adult student services from the viewpoint of the advisors of such programs.

#### SUMMARY

Twenty enthusiastic African American women originally agreed to participate in this study but dropped off after weighing the potential consequences for their decision.



The numbers dwindled down to six after they reviewed the criteria for participation, changed their minds, or claimed a scheduling conflict. They are keenly aware that race continues to matter in the context of urban PWIs and American society at large. While in the workplace or the classroom, the racial profiling of their sons weighs on their minds. When crimes are reported by the media, they secretly hope the perpetrator was not Black. Racial segregation among faculty remains, as well as inequality to economic and academic opportunities and resources. As long as some adult African American women are hesitant to speak for fear of potential retaliation for discussing their academic experiences at the university they attend, and remain keenly aware of how they may be labeled by faculty and other students because of what they say or do, urban research universities have only begun to acknowledge their presence, concerns, and their socioeconomic impact on the surrounding community.

Potential discussion that could result from this study may prompt higher education institutions such as PWIs to reevaluate their policies and programming for increased cultural sensitivity and relevance to adult African American women, bringing them one step closer to increased graduation rates.

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Zuberi, T & Bonilla-Silva, E. (Eds.) (2008). T. Zuberi & E. Bonilla-Silva (Eds.). *White logic, White methods: Racism and methodology* (pp.15-20). Landam, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.



## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### *Recruitment Materials*

##### **1. Email to Gatekeepers**

Dear <gatekeeper>,

I am a doctoral candidate in educational administration, and I am conducting a study on the educational resilience of adult African American women who recently graduated from an urban predominantly White university. I am seeking women who identify as African American women, age 25 and over, full or part-time employed, either recently graduated from the University of Louisville within the past two years (since 2012) or are in their last semester prior to graduation December 2014.

If you know any students who might be willing to talk to me about their experiences, please forward their contact information to me (email or phone number). Please feel free to forward this email to anyone in your area you think might know students willing to participate.

This study has been approved by the University of Louisville Institutional Review Board (IRB #14.0739). If you have any questions or concerns about sending me student contact information, please let me know.

Thank you for your time,

Wanda Taylor

wjadam01@louisville.edu

##### **2. Email to Potential Participant**

Hello <first name>,

My name is Wanda Taylor and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at the University of Louisville. You were recommended to me by <gatekeeper> for an research study that I am conducting addressing the resilience of adult African American women who've recently graduated from the University of Louisville (IRB#14.0739). He/She said you would be an excellent resource, so I would love for you to share your experiences with me. This study involves a series of three interviews over the next few months or as schedules permit. Participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any question at any time without penalty. Should you decide to participate, you will receive a pseudonym and your responses will be kept completely anonymous.

The criteria are as follows:

Women who identify as African American women, age 25 and over, full or part-time employed, either recently graduated from the University of Louisville within the past two years (since 2012) or are in their last semester prior to graduation December 2014.

I would like to thank you in advance for your participation and willingness to aid in the study on adult African American women undergraduates and their college experiences.

If you are interested in participating, we can find a time to meet in early September to talk more about the project. Let me know the days, location and times most convenient for you for the first interview.

Thanks,

Wanda Taylor

wjadam01@louisville.edu

### **3. Script for Phone Contact with Potential Participants**

Hi,

My name is Wanda Taylor and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at the University of Louisville. You were recommended to me by <gatekeeper> for a research study that I am conducting addressing the resilience of adult African American women who graduated from the University of Louisville.

He/She said you would be an excellent resource, so I would love for you to share your experiences with me. This study involves a series of three interviews over the next few months or as your schedule permits. Participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any question at any time without penalty. Should you decide to participate, you will receive a pseudonym and your responses will be kept completely anonymous.

I would like to thank you in advance for your participation and willingness to aid in this study on adult African American women undergraduates and their college experiences.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating, and we can find a time to meet in the next few weeks to talk more about the project.

## APPENDIX B

UofL Institutional Review Boards  
IRB NUMBER: 14.0739  
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 08/15/2014  
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 08/14/2015

### Subject Informed Consent Document

#### **Counterstories: Educational Resilience of Adult African American Women Attending an Urban Predominantly White University**

Investigator(s) name & address:

PI: Gaëtane Jean Marie, PhD, ELFH Department Chair, College of Education & Human Development, Rm 343A, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292  
Co-I: Wanda Taylor, MedCenter One, Ste. 200, 501 E. Broadway, Louisville, KY 40202

Site(s) where study is to be conducted: On campus- Belknap or HSC  
Phone number for subjects to call for questions: Dr. Gaëtane Jean Marie 502-852-0634;  
Wanda Taylor 502-852-2475

#### **Introduction and Background Information**

You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is being supervised by Dr. Gaëtane Jean Marie, as Principal Investigator, and conducted by Co-Investigator Wanda Taylor, doctoral candidate. The study is sponsored by the University of Louisville, Department of Leadership, Foundations & Human Resource Education and is part of a dissertation to be submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The study will take place home of the study participant or where the participant feels the most comfortable. Approximately 20 subjects will be invited to participate.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to identify the sources and factors affecting the educational resilience of adult African American women at an urban predominantly White institution. Educational resilience is academic success in spite of risk.

#### **Procedures**

In this study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire that will take approximately five minutes to complete. You will also be asked to participate in three

interviews sessions. Each interview will last 60-90 minutes. The interview sessions will be digitally recorded

UofL Institutional Review Boards  
IRB NUMBER: 14.0739  
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 08/15/2014  
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 08/14/2015

### **Counterstories: Educational Resilience of Adult African American Women Attending an Urban Predominantly White University**

and transcribed. The researcher will also take brief notes during each session. You will have the opportunity to review the information gathered and to provide feedback to the researcher during the last interview session.

#### **Potential Risks**

There are no foreseeable risks other than possible discomfort in answering personal questions.

#### **Benefits**

The possible benefits of this study will aid in the understanding of how adult African American women make sense of their experiences while attending a PWI. The information collected may not benefit you directly. The information learned in this study may be helpful to others.

#### **Confidentiality**

Total privacy cannot be guaranteed. Your privacy will be protected to the extent permitted by law. If the results from this study are published, your name will not be made public. While unlikely, the following may look at the study records:

The University of Louisville Institutional Review Board, Human Subjects Protection Program Office. The data will remain in a locked file cabinet or on a password-protected computer.

#### **Conflict of Interest**

This study involves no conflict of interest.

## **Voluntary Participation**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to be in this study you may stop taking part at any time. If you decide not to be in this study or if you stop taking part at any time, you will not lose any benefits for which you may qualify.

## **Research Subject's Rights, Questions, Concerns, and Complaints**

UofL Institutional Review Boards  
IRB NUMBER: 14.0739  
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 08/15/2014  
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 08/14/2015

### **Counterstories: Educational Resilience of Adult African American Women Attending an Urban Predominantly White University**

If you have any concerns or complaints about the study or the study staff, you have three options.

1. You may contact the principal investigator, Dr. Gaëtane Jean Marie at 502-852-0634 or  
Wanda Taylor, at 502-852-2475.
2. If you have any questions about your rights as a study subject, questions, concerns or complaints, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (HSPPO) (502) 852-5188. You may discuss any questions about your rights as a subject, in secret, with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or the HSPPO staff. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as lay members of the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this study.
3. If you want to speak to a person outside the University, you may call 1-877-852-1167. You will be given the chance to talk about any questions, concerns or complaints in secret. This is a 24 hour hot-line answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

This paper tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part. Your signature means that this study has been discussed with you, that your questions have been answered, and that you will take part in the study. This informed consent document is not a contract. You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this informed consent document. You will be given a signed copy of this paper to keep for your records.

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject/Legal Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Explaining the Consent Form    Date Signed (if other than the Investigator)

---

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date Signed

LIST OF INVESTIGATORS

PHONE NUMBERS

UofL Institutional Review Boards  
IRB NUMBER: 14.0739  
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 08/15/2014  
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 08/14/2015

**Counterstories: Educational Resilience of Adult African American Women  
Attending an Urban Predominantly White University**

PI: Gaëtane Jean Marie, PhD  
Co-I: Wanda Taylor

502-852-0634  
502-852-2475

## APPENDIX C

### Letter of Introduction

#### Counterstories: The Educational Resilience of Adult African American Women at an Urban Predominantly White University

Date

Dear Student,

You are being invited to participate in a research study about **Counterstories: The Educational Resilience of Adult African American Women at an Urban Predominantly White University**. There are no known risks for your participation in this research study. The information collected may not benefit you directly. The information learned in this study may be helpful to others. The information you provide will be used to complete research for a doctoral dissertation. Your completed questionnaires or any interview questions will be stored at locked file at the University of Louisville.

Individuals from the Department of Leadership, Foundations & Human Resource Education, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (HSPPPO), and other regulatory agencies may inspect these records. In all other respects, however, the data will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Should the data be published, your identity will not be disclosed.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. By signing the consent form you are agreeing to take part in this research study. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to be in this study you may stop taking part at any time. If you decide not to be in this study or if you stop taking part at any time, you will not lose any benefits for which you may qualify.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study, please contact Principal Investigator: Gaëtane Jean Marie, PhD at 502-852-0634 or Co-Investigator: Wanda Taylor at 502-852-2475.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office at (502) 852-5188. You can discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject, in private, with a member of the



Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also call this number if you have other questions about the research, and you cannot reach the research staff, or want to talk to someone else. The IRB is an independent committee made up of people from the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as people from the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this research study.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research or research staff and you do not wish to give your name, you may call 1-877-852-1167. This is a 24 hour hot line answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

Sincerely,

---

Gaëtane Jean Marie, PhD

---

Wanda Taylor

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Guide

The following questions are designed to create a conversation between you and me. I may ask more questions for clarification. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. You may decline to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time.

I am going to ask you questions about your experience as an adult African American student at the university and how it impacts your life personally and professionally. I will also ask questions about how you see yourself, and how you perceived your interactions with faculty, staff and students. I will be digitally audiotaping the interviews with your consent. I will also take some written notes during the interview. These notes will help me to generate new questions and to remember something that I need to clarify. I will provide you a copy of the transcribed interviews to review during the third interview or email the transcription after the second interview asking for your verifications, clarifications and feedback. On the demographic sheet I asked you to provide a name by which you will be identified for the purpose of this study. I am the only person who will know who you are.

#### **1. Situation: An overall picture**

- What event or experiences motivated you to enroll in college?
- Based upon the reason you decided to go to college, did the university's faculty, resources, and services meet your expectations?

#### **2. Racism: Personal reality**

- In conversations with White students or faculty and staff, how did you see yourself treated?
- Did you feel the need to socialize and communicate differently with White students/faculty/staff in contrast to how you communicate with your peers? If so, why? Give an example(s).
- When you feel the need to assert yourself, and do so, what was the reaction from White students/faculty or staff? Give an example(s).
- Did you openly express and share your views in the classroom and other parts of the university social environment?

**3. Strategies: Sources of resiliency**

- Complete this statement: When things go wrong I.....
- If the problem was not resolved, what did you do?
- What strategies were the most effective?
- What/who gave you strength?
- How have did your experiences at the university affect you emotionally, psychologically, physically, mentally? (both positive and negative experiences)

**4. As a Black woman – wife and/or mother: What was it like? (Ask/answer if applicable.)**

- What is it like being a parent, wife or both and going to school?
- How did you manage your time with all your responsibilities?
- How did you find time for your child? (self) (spouse?)
- What do you for fun?

**5. Reflection: Overall impact**

- Write about your most memorable experience or encounter at the university. Indicate what positive or negative impact it had on your ability to persist toward graduation.

## APPENDIX E

### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Preferred name to be used in the study \_\_\_\_\_

Date of birth \_\_\_\_\_

NOTE: The following questions apply to your status at the time of attendance at the university.

**Marital Status:**

**Employed (check all that apply):**

\_\_\_\_ Married

\_\_\_\_ Full-time

\_\_\_\_ Separated/Divorced

\_\_\_\_ Part-time

\_\_\_\_ Never Married

\_\_\_\_ Living with significant  
Other

\_\_\_\_ Work-study

**Parent or Guardian:** Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**Attended College:** \_\_\_\_ Full-time \_\_\_\_ Part-time

**Academic level as of today:**

\_\_\_\_ Completed an Associate's Degree      \_\_\_\_ Date of completion

\_\_\_\_ Completed a Bachelor's Degree      \_\_\_\_ Date of completion

\_\_\_\_ Master's level or higher      \_\_\_\_ Date of completion

Other \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation while a student

\_\_\_\_\_

Best way to contact you:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

---

---

*Demographic information sheet.* A self-report demographic sheet was used to obtain information regarding age, employment status, education level, and marital status.

APPENDIX F  
MEMBER CHECKING MEMO

**MEMO**

TO: Dissertation Research Participants

FROM: Wanda Taylor

Re: Member Checking

Thank you for participating in this research study. Please read the attached counternarrative study report. Check to see if the information is correct and if you would like to add or change something that I have written. I will work with you to make changes directly to the report.

Please document your participation in this process (reviewing and checking) on the attached form. Please put your initials by the name you used for the interviews.

APPENDIX G  
MEMBER CHECK FORM

NAME USED \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

I have reviewed the counternarrative study report and (check one)

\_\_\_\_\_ I have made the attached changes or suggestions.

\_\_\_\_\_ There were no changes or suggestions.

## Resilient Characteristics

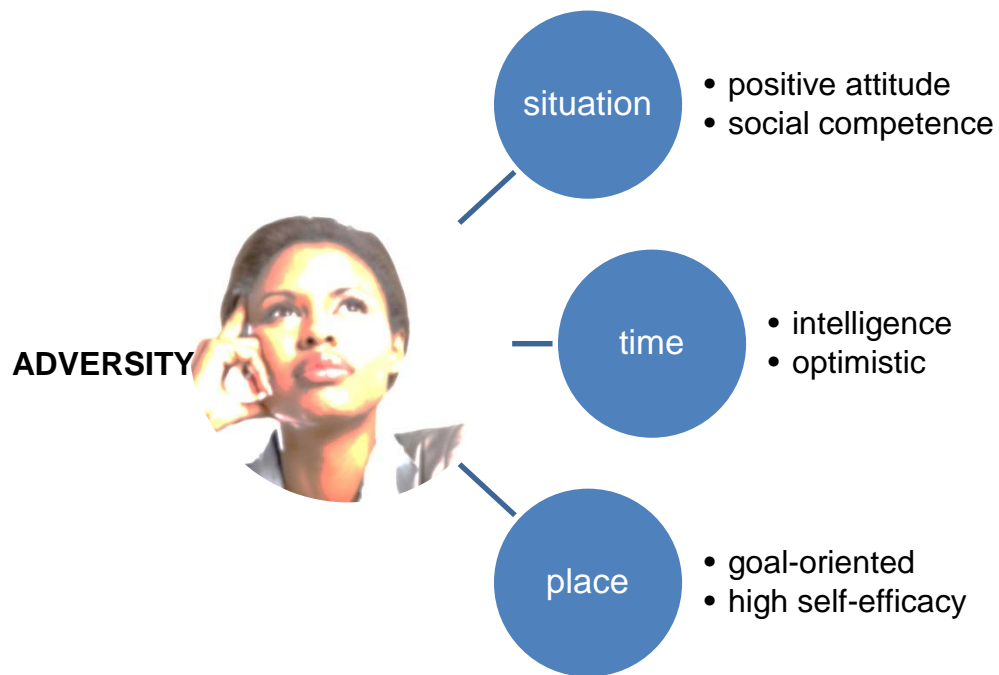
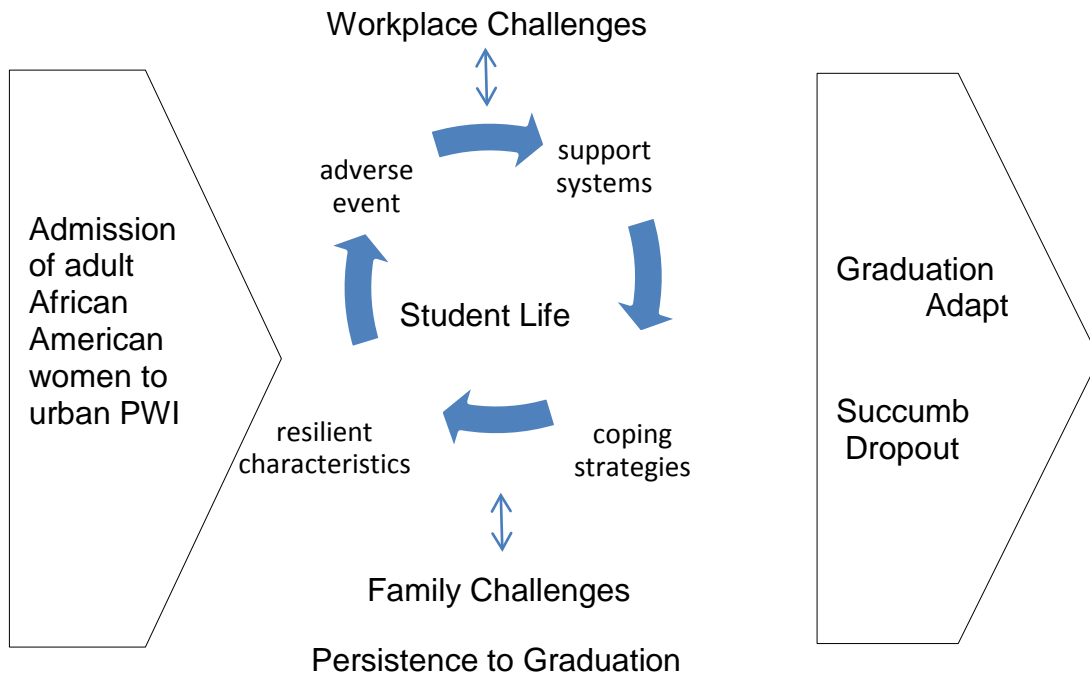


Figure 1. Characteristics Conducive to Educational Resilience in Higher Education



## APPENDIX I



**Figure 2.** Proposed conceptual framework of areas affecting or contributing to the educational resilience of adult African American women at an urban PWI

## CURRICULUM VITA

Wanda Adams Taylor, MEd, PhD  
7316 Orchard Lake Blvd.  
Louisville, KY 40218  
Home 502-614-6142  
Work 502-852-2475  
wjadam01@louisville.edu

### SUMMARY

Bright, promising administrative and academic professional with solid education and exposure to higher education administration and background in an academic setting with departmental liaison experience; university certifications; proficient in use of Microsoft Office, PeopleSoft Financials, Microsoft Outlook, Access database; handling of multiple tasks and strong organizational skills.

### EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE, Louisville, KY  
PhD Educational Leadership and Organizational Development – Post-Secondary Education  
August 2015  
Master of Education in Higher Education Administration August 2002; GPA 3.67/4.00  
Future Professors Program successful completion May 2004

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE, Louisville, KY  
Professional Grant Writing Workshop - University of Louisville; Louisville, KY  
May 29-30, 2014  
Basics of Research Administration – SRA International – Louisville, KY - July 10-12, 2013  
Designing an Online Course – August 2006  
Making Multimodal Classrooms – April 2006  
The Management Institute: Managers as Leaders in the Modern Workplace – October 2003  
Effective Supervision Series – December 2002  
PeopleSoft Financials: Inquiry – July 2002, December 2004, upgrade training 2006  
PeopleSoft Financials: Requisitions Data Entry/Approval – July 2002, November 2004, upgrade training 2006  
Professional Excellence Series – April 2001  
University Business Administration Certification – December 1999

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE, Louisville, KY  
Bachelor of Arts, Art-Graphic Design, August 1995, GPA 3.59/4.00

JEFFERSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE, Louisville, KY  
Associate of Applied Science, Commercial Art Technology, December 1992, GPA 3.80/4.00

SPENCERIAN COLLEGE, Louisville, KY  
Business Management-Certificate in Fashion Merchandising, December 1979, GPA 3.80/4.00

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 4/2013 – present      CLINICAL CONTRACTS DIVISION- EXECUTIVE VICE  
PRESIDENT OF RESEARCH & INNOVATION  
*University of Louisville*  
Grants & Contracts Assistant  
Ensure the accurate processing of clinical trial budgets and grant awards by checking submission of all required documentation, budget entry in PeopleSoft, and review budget reallocations per department requests; collaborate with clinical contract negotiators and department contacts as needed
- 2009 – 4/25/2013      OFFICE OF SPONSORED PROGRAMS ADMINISTRATION  
*University of Louisville*  
Grants & Contracts Assistant  
  
Ensure the accurate processing of academic and research grant awards by checking submission of all required documentation, budget entry in PeopleSoft, and review budget reallocations per department requests; collaborate with grants management team and department contacts as needed
- 6/2000 – present      THE McCONNELL CENTER , Louisville, KY  
*University of Louisville*  
Program Assistant Senior  
Provide administrative and office support to Director; serve as liaison for the Center; responsible for maintenance of website, publications creation and distribution; editing, composing and/or processing correspondence; coordinate arrangements for on-campus events; order supplies and assist unit business manager in reconciling accounts; schedule Center's conference room; conduct web researches as needed; design event ads and flyers; create and maintain databases; handle travel arrangements for Director and guest speakers; work with scholars responsible for event publicity; process bulk mailings.

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE-UNIVERSITY INTERNSHIPS**

- 1/2002 – 4 /2002      DELPHI CENTER, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY  
Intern (under Higher Education Administration Masters program)  
Assisted Director with planning, implementation of programming with Blackboard software;  
  
Created and implemented survey distribution to KY college Blackboard network regarding student support services
- 6/2002 – 8/2002      A.C.C.E.S.S. CENTER (Adult Commuter Center/Evening Student Services)  
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY  
Intern (under Higher Education Administration Master's program)  
Assisted Director with planning, implementation and facilitation of adult student orientation seminars, planned programming for Fall 2002 and Spring 2003 semesters, format still used there today

## RESEARCH

PUBLICATIONS: Assisted in research and manuscript compilation for the following publications of the McConnell Center:

### Books

Gregg, G. L. (ed.) (2001). *Securing democracy: Why we have an electoral college*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books.

Byrd, R. and Gregg, G. L. (2000). *The Senate – Great forum of constitutional liberty*. Louisville, KY: McConnell Center, University of Louisville.

Gregg, G. L. C Busch, A. E. (2000). *Electing the president in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Louisville, KY: McConnell Center, University of Louisville.

ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT: Fieldwork in the following university departments:

A.C.C.E.S.S. Center, University of Louisville	12-05-2002
University Career Center, University of Louisville	04-24-2002
McConnell Center, University of Louisville	12-12-2001

## SERVICE

### UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY

1984-2006

Commission on the Status of Women 2005-2006; The College of Education & Human Development Graduate Student Government Association-ELFH representative 2004-2005; Staff Senate Jan 2005-June 2006; University of Louisville Student Life Non-Academic

Discipline Hearing Council 2002-2003; University of Louisville Alumni Association; Kentucky Colonel 1984; Chair, Parents Advisory Board –Chestnut YMCA 1983-1984.

10-17-2006; 10-19-2006

Vice President for Student Affairs Search – interview panel participant representing the Commission on the Status of Women, University of Louisville.

8-31-2005 – 12-7-2005

Ekstrom Construction Meetings – assisted in structural and functional planning of the new wing of Ekstrom Library representing the McConnell Center.

### INVITED PRESENTATIONS, LOCAL

12-11-2008

Participation in COSW (Commission on the Status of Women) focus group session #5 –input and discussion on upcoming survey on barriers to success for female staff

12-10-2002

The New Traditional Students and University Services – panel discussion participant in Dr. Michael Cuyjet's College Subculture class, University of Louisville.

- 7-11-2002 to 8-8-2002      A.C.C.E.S.S. Center Adult/Transfer Student Orientation Sessions-participant and assistant facilitator. A.C.C.E.S.S. Center, University of Louisville.
- 7-22-1994                      Learning Disabilities Workshop- presentation /discussion on parent perspective on how teachers can approach issues regarding the teaching of children with attention deficit disorder (ADD or ADHD), Department of Teaching and Learning, College of Education and Human Development, University of Louisville.

**AWARDS & HONORS  
CERTIFICATIONS**

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE, Louisville, KY  
 Future Faculty Program (formerly Future Professors Program) 2003-2004  
 Certificate in Management Development – March 2004  
 Making Multimodal Classrooms – April 2006  
 The Management Institute: Managers as Leaders in the Modern Workplace – October 2003  
 Effective Supervision Series – December 2002  
 PeopleSoft Financials: Inquiry – July 2002, December 2004  
 PeopleSoft Financials: Requisitions Data Entry/Approval – July 2002, November 2004  
 Professional Excellence Series – April 2001  
 University Business Administration Certification – December 1999  
 International Who's Who of Professionals 1996  
 Threlkeld Scholarship Award May 1995  
 Golden Key National Honor Society  
 Phi Theta Kappa International Honor Society  
 Program Coordinator Award, Jefferson Community College 1991-92  
 Commissioned a KY Colonel 8-31-84, nominated by state representative for outstanding community service

**ADDITIONAL WORK EXPERIENCE**

- 3/1998 – 6/2000              UNIVERSITY PLANNING, DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION, Louisville, KY  
*University of Louisville*  
 Secretary II  
 Provided support to administrative secretary and department staff consisting of transcribing/editing correspondence; preparing project documents, transmittals, change orders, electronic and paper requisitions; handled/sorted mail; maintained project files; scheduled appointments and setup meetings; answered/screened phone calls, providing information as necessary; processed scans for insert in project files, documents and e-mail; use of electronic mail (GroupWise), Financial Record System and internet; send faxes, make copies; open and lock up the building as necessary.
- 6/1997 – 3/1998              MERRICK PRINTING COMPANY, INC., Louisville, KY  
 Pre-Flight/Post-Flight Specialist  
 Set up client print jobs by uploading files to company server, verifying and recording its contents, proof lasers and set the files up for production department; also check print proofs after production process; involves troubleshooting and working closely with sales team and assist clients as needed; use of variety of portable drives and disk (floppy, SyQuest, opticals, CD rom, jaz or zip); applications (both Mac and PC) involved include Quark Xpress

3.32 and 4.00, Illustrator 7.0, Photoshop 4.0, Microsoft Excel and Word, Framemaker 4 and 5.

- 3/1997 – 6/1997 UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE-TEMPORARY SERVICES, Louisville, KY
- Data Entry-Development/Support Services  
Input donor information into (Advance) database, primarily biographic maintenance; researched and verified donor information using directories and other resources.
  - Administrative Secretary Assistant-University Planning, Design and Construction  
Provided support to administrative secretary and staff by preparing documents for filing; handled multi-line phone; copied, faxed and typed correspondence and documents as needed in Windows 95 using Microsoft Word.
  - Medical Office Assistant-Department of Surgical Oncology, Alliant Medical Pavilion, Louisville, KY  
Provided clerical support to T. Jeffrey Wieman, M.D. and Scott W. Taber, M.D. by sorting mail, screening phone calls, maintaining doctor's itinerary, greet medical associates, type correspondence, schedule/confirm appointments; use of Microsoft Word, medical terminology, dictaphone, fax and multi-line phone.
- 11/1995 – 3/1997 COMPDENT CORPORATION, formerly Louisville, KY (Roswell, GA)  
Desktop Publisher  
Assistant to publishing manager, responsible for the in-house typesetting and design of printed material used by the company state offices such as schedules, dentist lists, newsletters and employee directories; use of PageMaker 5.0 and Quark Xpress 3.32 for Windows, UMAX Color Scanner and HP LaserJet 4; filing of proofs and print order requests; assisting in collating packages as needed
- 9/1992 – 1/1993 UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE – REGISTRAR'S OFFICE, Louisville, KY  
Student Records Assistant  
Assisted staff in processing student academic transcript requests and verification; files and input data on computer; sorted in-coming mail

#### **ADDITIONAL INTERNSHIPS**

- 5/1991 – 6/1991 KINETIC CORPORATION, Louisville, KY  
Art Director Assistant  
Assisted in preparation of client catalog page layouts; developed stats from transparencies
- 9/1991 – 5/1992 JEFFERSON COMMUNITY COLLEGE, Louisville, KY  
Journalism Coordinator Assistant/Contributing Graphic Artist, work-study  
Scheduled office meetings; assisted setup and arrangements for national student conferences; provided graphics and illustration for college newspaper; assisted staff editor and advertising manager  
Intern: The Mr. and Mrs. Daniel C. Ulmer African-American Scholarship/Internship Program

Provided 100 hours in college community service; designed logos, posters and flyers for campus organizations

5/1984 – 8/1984

THE COURIER JOURNAL, Louisville, KY

Intern, Creative Services Department: The Business Intern Program

Selected from the 10 finalists of 100 applicants; designed camera-ready advertising layouts; assisted in creation and development of slides for marketing presentations; developed stats and utilized reduction copiers

## **REFERENCES**

Available upon request.